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JAN. 4, 2016

# THE NEW YORKER



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# THE NEW YORKER

JANUARY 4, 2016

	6	GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN
	17	THE TALK OF THE TOWN <i>Adam Gopnik on moving monuments; Tom Jones in the Bronx; steam heat; Charlie Kaufman's work; chess whiz.</i>
ANDREW MARANTZ	22	READY FOR PRIME TIME <i>Leslie Jones's long road to stardom.</i>
PAUL RUDNICK	30	MY DEMANDS
DEXTER FILKINS	32	SWAMPED <i>Jeb Bush's fight over the Everglades.</i>
LARISSA MacFARQUHAR	38	WHAT MONEY CAN BUY <i>The Ford Foundation has a new mission.</i>
LAURA SECOR	52	WAR OF WORDS <i>A woman tries to stop stoning in Iran.</i>
OTTESSA MOSHFEGH	62	FICTION "THE BEACH BOY"
EMILY NUSSBAUM	71	THE CRITICS ON TELEVISION "Transparent."
JAMES WOOD	73 74	BOOKS <i>Briefly Noted</i> "The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai."
ALEX ROSS	78	MUSICAL EVENTS "Bel Canto," "Great Scott."
HILTON ALS	80	THE THEATRE "The Color Purple."
ANTHONY LANE	82	THE CURRENT CINEMA "The Hateful Eight," "The Revenant."
MEGHAN O'ROURKE	29	POEMS "Poem of Regret for an Old Friend"
JACOB SHORES-ARGUELLO	66	"In Ukraine"
FRANK VIVA		COVER "The Long View"

**DRAWINGS** Bob Eckstein, Liam Francis Walsh, Matthew Stiles Davis, Zachary Kanin, Jacob Samuel, Christopher Weyant, Danny Shanahan, Michael Maslin, Liana Finck, Joe Dator, P. C. Vey, Drew Dernavich, Will McPhail, Michael Crawford, Robert Mankoff, Edward Steed, Tom Chitty, David Sipress, Amy Hwang, Benjamin Schwartz, Barbara Smaller, Kaamran Hafeez **SPOTS** Romy Blümel





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**PAUL RUDNICK** (SHOUTS & MURMURS, P. 30) will publish his second young-adult novel, "It's All Your Fault," in January.

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**FRANK VIVA** (COVER), an illustrator and a graphic designer, was chosen by the M.T.A. to create art for New York's subway cars in 2015. He also recently published the children's books "Outstanding in the Rain" and "Young Charlotte, Filmmaker," and has another, "Sea Change," coming out in the spring.

**DEXTER FILKINS** ("SWAMPED," P. 32) became a staff writer in 2011. His book "The Forever War" won the 2008 National Book Critics Circle Award for nonfiction.

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## NEWYORKER.COM EVERYTHING IN THE MAGAZINE, PLUS MORE THAN FIFTEEN ORIGINAL STORIES A DAY.

### ALSO:

**DAILY COMMENT / CULTURAL COMMENT:** Opinions and analysis by Jeffrey Toobin, Sarah Larson, and others.

**FICTION AND POETRY:** Meghan O'Rourke and Jacob Shores-Arguello read their poems, and Ottesa Moshfegh reads her short story.

**VIDEO:** In the latest "Shorts & Murmurs," Marc Philippe Eskenazi croons holiday tunes (updated to account for the effects of global warming) to passersby at Rockefeller Center.

**THE YEAR IN REVIEW:** Bob Mankoff lists his favorite *New Yorker* cartoons from the past year. Plus, the best poems and the most-read articles of 2015.

**PODCASTS:** On the latest Political Scene, Jeffrey Toobin joins Dorothy Wickenden for a discussion about Ted Cruz and foreign policy. On the monthly Poetry Podcast, Paul Muldoon talks to Ellen Bass about her poem "Reincarnation" and about Adam Zagajewski's "Try to Praise the Mutilated World."

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# THE MAIL

## MEMENTO MORI

A part of the death industry that was skirted in Rebecca Mead's article about the artisanal funeral director Caitlin Doughty is the cemetery ("Our Bodies, Ourselves," November 30th). At a cemetery, there are concrete vaults, coffins made from exotic materials, and headstones that have been transported from across the country; perpetual mowing, irrigation, and leaking toxins become one's environmental legacy. Contrast that with a natural burial: the unembalmed body is wrapped in a simple shroud and laid to rest in a three-to-four-foot-deep hand-dug hole, marked only with materials found on site and a small metal surveyor's disk, and decorated with native wildflowers. When a natural burial site is overseen by a nonprofit land trust or a public-park system where the proceeds purchase more conservation land and restore the landscape to a meadow or a forest, the environmental legacy of the departed extends to land that is protected as sacred burial ground, which even the most cynical developer or government will not dare disturb. So rather than become a puff of crematory air pollution, each of us can partially compensate for our living environmental footprint by occupying and securing special ground, one death at a time.

*Robert Hutchinson, gravedigger  
Prairie Creek Conservation Cemetery  
Alachua County, Fla.*

I got an approximation of the at-home death experience that Doughty endorses when I had Gentle Goodbyes euthanize my golden retriever for a back-yard burial. I will always remember the room in my house where she was last: the sight of her body on the floor, and then in the blanket that we wrapped her in before placing her in the grave dug outside. Doughty argues that getting close to death this way is good. Perhaps, since it's going to be painful no matter what, we should embrace it. I am reminded of Ellen Dean,

who reflects, in "Wuthering Heights," "I don't know if it be a peculiarity in me, but I am seldom otherwise than happy while watching in the chamber of death, should no frenzied or despairing mourner share the duty with me. I see a repose that neither earth nor hell can break, and I feel an assurance of the endless and shadowless hereafter."

*Laura Inman  
Rye, N.Y.*

## TWEETING FOR GOD

Thank you for the moving story by Adrian Chen about Megan Phelps-Roper, who tweeted hateful messages on behalf of the Westboro Baptist Church until she made connections with people who had been subject to her vitriol ("Unfollow," November 23rd). My family was honored to host her and her sister Grace in our home in Los Angeles after they fled Westboro, and we have kept in touch ever since. David Abitbol called us from Israel a few weeks before the 2013 Jewlicious festival and asked if the two women who had just left Westboro could come to speak. It was undoubtedly the wildest request we have ever received. After all, they had picketed the festival a few years before, and I was the rabbi whom Westboro had called a "whore" in its protest in Long Beach that year, as Chen mentions in his piece. But I trusted David's instincts. The women proved to be two of the most memorable speakers—and house guests—we have ever had. Their bravery shows that, no matter how people are programmed to hate, there always remains the possibility of transformation and healing.

*Rabbi Yonah Bookstein  
Los Angeles, Calif.*

*Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime phone number via e-mail to themail@newyorker.com. Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium. We regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter or return letters.*

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# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

DEC/JAN  
2015/2016

WEDNESDAY  
30TH

THURSDAY  
31ST

FRIDAY  
1ST

SATURDAY  
2ND

SUNDAY  
3RD

MONDAY  
4TH

TUESDAY  
5TH

**GEORGES BIZET'S OPERA** "Les Pêcheurs de Perles" (1863) is a classic example of nineteenth-century French exoticism: it paints a rosy picture of humble pearl fishers in the faraway land of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) with a perfumed, Gallic-sounding score whose sweeping melodies delight the ear. But Penny Woolcock, who directs the Metropolitan Opera's first staging of the work in a century, strips away some of the fantasy, transporting the action to an impoverished present-day coastal village in the Far East, where fragile tin-and-cardboard homes abut the sea. The production gives a cast that excels in the art of lyric singing—including the soprano Diana Damrau (above), who portrays the Hindu priestess Leïla—the chance to render Bizet's characters in three dimensions.

ART | THE THEATRE  
NIGHT LIFE | CLASSICAL MUSIC  
MOVIES | DANCE  
ABOVE & BEYOND  
FOOD & DRINK

PHOTOGRAPH BY PARI DUKOVIC





# ART

## MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

### Guggenheim Museum

#### "Photo-Poetics: An Anthology"

Ten artists—all women, with the exception of Elad Lassry—are brought together to illustrate recent conceptual approaches to contemporary photography. As a group, they see the medium from a critical distance, and, as with the Pictures generation before them, an obvious influence, much of their work involves appropriated images. The result is photography once removed—slyly self-referential, often brilliant but also arcane. Anne Collier, Leslie Hewitt, and Erica Baum make the most direct connections, via pop culture: album covers, illustrated books, magazines, snapshots, both isolated and juxtaposed, jogging the collective memory. Like Hewitt, Sara VanDerBeek and Kathrin Sonntag construct sculptural environments for found photographs and other art-historic images (Rodchenko, Miró, Lichtenstein), creating small, private, even insular worlds. When those overlap with the world at large, as they do in Erin Shirreff and Moyra Davey's video pieces, the art resonates and engages, opening up what is an otherwise closed conversation. Through March 23.

### The Whitney Museum

#### "Frank Stella: A Retrospective"

The crowded installation tracks the New York painter's fifty-seven-year career. At the start is the deathly glamour of Stella's Black Paintings—bands in matte enamel, separated by fuzzy pinstripes of nearly bare canvas—which shocked with their dour simplicity when they were first shown at MOMA, in 1959. Begun when the artist was a senior at Princeton, they amounted to tombstones for Abstract Expressionism and heralds of minimalism. The show ends with one crazy-looking mode after another, mostly in the form of wall-hung constructions, created since the early nineteen-seventies. In between are too few of the swaggering compositions (targetlike concentric stripes, designs based on compasses and protractors, shaped canvases) that made Stella a god of the sixties art world. His impact on abstract art was something like Dylan's on music and Warhol's on more or less everything. Stella made a permanent difference in art history. He is extraordinarily intelligent and extravagantly skilled. But his example is cautionary. Even groundbreaking ideas have life spans, and Stella's belief in inherent values of abstract art has long since ceased to be shared

by younger artists. His ambition rolls on, unalloyed with self-questioning or humor. Through Feb. 7.

### Brooklyn Museum

**"Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland, 1861-2008"**  
Founded in the mid-nineteenth century as a beach resort for the wealthy, Coney Island quickly became a seedy populist playground. In 1893, the *Times* dubbed it "Sodom-by-the-sea"; in 1936, Henry Miller wrote, "Everything is sliding and crumbling, everything glitters, totters, teeters, titters." This selection of art and artifacts traces the site's hundred-and-fifty-year history and includes such classics as Joseph Stella's Cubo-Futurist painting from 1913-14, the libidinous social satires of Reginald Marsh from the thirties, Weegee's 1940 photograph of an impossibly crowded beach, and a trio of carousel horses (also, one camel). But it's the less familiar material—the 1905-08 comic-strip roller coasters of Winsor McCay, the grave bathers in George Tooker's 1948 painting—that is the most bracing. The dark side of Coney Island is most eloquently conveyed in a pair of moving images related to the electrocution of a circus elephant in Luna Park, in 1903: a film clip of the event and Lucy Dyson's melancholy 2008 animation, a music video for the band All India Radio. Through March 13.

### Dia:Chelsea

#### "Robert Ryman"

This succinct retrospective of twenty-two works by the American painter offers a tacit reproach to today's art-world circus. Ryman, now eighty-five, has been making all-white abstract paintings, in square formats of different sizes, for most of the past six decades. His art's phlegmatic allure involves qualities of different paint mediums, applied dead smooth or textured by brushstrokes, on canvas, board, paper, aluminum, and other surfaces. At times, the main—or, really, only—event is an emphasis on the way a work is attached to a wall: by bolts, staples, brackets, or flanges. Always, Ryman invites contemplation of the light that falls on his paintings and of their formal relation to the rooms that contain them. It's a kind of mute art that, generating reverent and brainy chatter, puts uninitiated citizens in mind of the emperor's new clothes. Yet, actually, the populist fable rather befits the serious aims of Ryman and his avant-garde generation, who insisted on something very like full-frontal nudity in artistic intentions. The emperor—roughly, high-modernist faith in art's world-changing mission—could retain fealty only if stripped of fancy styles and sentimental excuses. That was Ryman's formative moment. It was succeeded by a suspicion, now amounting to a resigned conviction, that contemporary art is an industry producing just clothes, with

no ruling authority inside them. Through June 18.

### Museum of Chinese in America "Sub Urbanisms: Casino Urbanization, Chinatowns, and the Contested American Landscape"

After 9/11, the Mohegan Sun megacasino recruited thousands of laid-off workers from Chinatown, who've adapted single-family homes in southeastern Connecticut into boarding houses for six or more residents. The new community is evoked in this fascinating show through photographs, videotaped interviews, and schematic drawings. The inclusion of a lingerie-bedecked clothesline refers to the Chinese preference for line drying, which irks Connecticut locals raised on the cult of the washer-dryer, who view the habit as both an aesthetic affront and a threat to property values. Such cross-cultural tensions run high, and some suburban councils have resorted to blight laws to prevent newcomers from planting vegetable gardens on their front lawns. But why not encourage the transformation of ornamental verdure into something more eco-conscious and life-sustaining? Through March 27.

## GALLERIES—UPTOWN

### Julie Ault

As a founder of the eighties collective Group Material, Ault made exhibiting and archiving the work of others its own form of art-making. She continues to do so in this impressionistic show, titled "Afterlife," a reboot of her presentation at last year's Whitney Biennial. There are paintings by Martin Wong, a self-portrait photographed by David Wojnarowicz, and mirrored thresholds between rooms which evoke the home of Liberace (all three men died of AIDS). Memory and absence are leitmotifs here, and recur in Wojnarowicz's "magic box," a time capsule of sorts containing beaded necklaces, a skull painted blue, and an envelope stuffed with Argentine pesos. It's one of many means by which Ault places art works and archival objects on equal footing; another is a wall-mounted display of a 1993 issue of this magazine, opened to Janet Malcolm's profile of Sylvia Plath. Through Jan. 16. (Galerie Buchholz, 17 E. 82nd St. 646-964-4276.)

### Nathaniel Dorsky

In these small stills from Dorsky's experimental silent movies, people appear as reflections and shadows or obscured by a scrim. (They may remind some viewers of Saul Leiter's color work.) Like the films themselves (which are not on view here), the pictures thwart narratives, but the meditative slowness of the moving images is hard to convey frame by frame. Dorsky's best shots pinpoint the pleasures of absorbed attention—on an overblown rose, an orange lizard, a shoe

falling apart under water. Trees and flowering branches, usually seen in double-exposed layers, are nothing less than an exploration of bliss. Through Jan. 9. (Blum, 20 W. 57th St. 212-244-6055.)

### Erich Lessing / Andrew Mezvinsky

Lessing, a photojournalist affiliated with Magnum, spent the Second World War in British Palestine before returning to Europe, in 1947, where his work ran the gamut from smiling candids of beachgoers to reportage of Willy Brandt outside a half-destroyed Reichstag to Golda Meir lost in cigarette smoke. The photojournalism is competent, if undistinguished. Mezvinsky, a young American based in Vienna, exhibits a neutral animation of a pastoral landscape, complete with deer and ballerinas. The work becomes darker, if not more profound, once you learn its title, "A Good Day," which is borrowed from Primo Levi's memoir of Auschwitz. Through Jan. 3. (Austrian Cultural Forum, 11 E. 52nd St. 212-319-5300.)

### "Hunt's Three-Ring Circus: American Groups Before 1950"

The throngs in midtown aren't limited to the sidewalks. They're filling the walls here, starting out from more than a hundred photographs of people at picnics, beauty contests, political conventions, and fancy-dress balls. Drawn from the collection of W. M. Hunt, and organized by the International Center of Photography, the pictures express camaraderie, competition, and all-American togetherness taken to the extreme. A large panoramic view of the employees of Cleveland's Fisher Body factory on September 21, 1926, can barely contain its multitude. Other groups, seen from above, are arranged into the shapes of the Liberty Bell and an anchor, but more informal get-togethers are the show's main attraction, including one scene of a group of young graduates lounging on the grass holding huge slices of watermelon. Through Jan. 8. (1285 Avenue of the Americas Art Gallery, 1285 Sixth Ave. 212-857-0000.)

## GALLERIES—BROOKLYN

### Sebastian Black

It's hard to detect, but the curving, overlapping forms in this young artist's impressive paintings are based on the image of a cartoon puppy. On occasion, you can detect a paw or a muzzle, but in most works the features are abstracted beyond recognition, into ovoid and wavelike forms in restricted palettes—yellow, lime green, and chartreuse; indigo and royal purple—that recall Latin-American modernism. Black seems skeptical of painting for its own sake, though, and also exhibits work from his "Period Piece" series, in which punctuation marks are scattered, under glass, across tables, in a glib update of El Lissitzky. Through Jan. 10. (Clearing, 396 Johnson Ave., Bushwick. 718-456-0396.)



## THE THEATRE

### OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

#### The Changeling

Red Bull Theatre stages Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's Jacobean tragedy, directed by Jesse Berger and featuring Manoel Felciano, Sara Topham, and Christian Coulson. In previews. (Lucille Lortel, 121 Christopher St. 212-352-3101.)

#### Coil 2016

P.S. 122's annual festival of new work includes Annie Dorsen's "Yesterday Tomorrow," a mashup of the Beatles and "Annie"; Frank Boyd's "The Holler Sessions," a live radio show; and "Confirmation," Chris Thorpe's meditation on right-wing British politics and confirmation bias. Opens Jan. 5. (Various locations. 212-352-3101.)

#### Maurice Hines: Tappin' Thru Life

The dancer, director, and brother of Gregory Hines recounts his life in show business, in a stage memoir directed by Jeff Calhoun. In previews. (New World Stages, 340 W. 50th St. 212-239-6200.)

#### Mother Courage and Her Children

Tonya Pinkins plays the indefatigable war profiteer in Brian Kulick's production of the Brecht play, featuring music by Duncan Sheik. In previews. (Classic Stage Company, 136 E. 13th St. 866-811-4111.)

#### Our Mother's Brief Affair

Lynne Meadow directs Richard Greenberg's play for Manhattan Theatre Club, starring Linda Lavin as an ailing mother who reveals a shocking secret to her children. In previews. (Samuel J. Friedman, 261 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

### NOW PLAYING

#### Dames at Sea

First produced in 1966 at the legendary Caffe Cino, starring a teen-age Bernadette Peters, this

## FARCEUR

*Andrea Martin trades the trapeze for sardines in "Noises Off."*

IN 2013, ANDREA MARTIN gave theatregoers one of the most euphoric moments in recent Broadway memory, playing the life-loving grandma in Diane Paulus's circus-infused revival of "Pippin." Midway through her big number, "No Time at All," Martin flung open her housedress to reveal a shimmering corset, mounted a trapeze, and wound up dangling upside down fourteen feet above the stage, her ankles gripped by a hunky acrobat, belting out her next verse. She was sixty-six.

Two years and a well-deserved Tony Award later, Martin is starring in the Roundabout's production of "Noises Off" (in previews, at the American Airlines Theatre), Michael Frayn's crowd-pleasing farce within a farce. She plays both a Cockney housekeeper bearing a plate of sardines and the actress portraying her in a doomed touring company. "I was saying to my neighbor in the elevator today, 'I don't think I've ever done anything more difficult in my life than this,'" Martin said recently, before a rehearsal. It's more difficult than death-defying acrobatics? "Every part of my brain has to be tapped," she reasoned. "I have to do the Cockney accent, the standard British accent. I have to be precise with the physical comedy. I have to know who my characters are in a world that is unfamiliar. I'm an Armenian girl from Portland, Maine!"

If you were under the impression that Martin is Canadian, you're not alone. In 1970, she settled in Toronto, where she was cast in a legendary production of "Godspell" alongside Eugene Levy, Gilda Radner, and Martin Short. The Toronto comedy scene was a convergence of talent akin to that of Paris in the twenties, giving rise to "SCTV," the sketch series that launched John Candy, Catherine O'Hara, and Rick Moranis. Martin's signature character was the leopard-clad loudmouth Edith Prickley. Nowadays, you can find her on the hilariously barbed sitcom "Difficult People," playing the mother of the comedian Julie Klausner, herself a high-anxiety broad cut from a similar cloth.

In "Noises Off," directed by Jeremy Herrin, Martin will be joined by an ace ensemble, including Tracee Chimo, Campbell Scott, Megan Hilty, and Jeremy Shamos. To prepare, she had been scouring YouTube for clips of veteran British character actresses: Julie Walters in "Acorn Antiques," Patricia Routledge in "Keeping Up Appearances." As she talked, she pulled up a scene on her phone of Irene Handl in the 1968 film "Wonderwall" and parroted along: "Ain't it a lovely day, Mr. Collins?" She said of the Cockney accent, "I want to invest in it the same way I invested in the trapeze."

—Michael Schulman



delightful musical was born out of George Haimsohn, Robin Miller, and Jim Wise's affection for all those nineteen-thirties singing-and-dancing shows, featuring a wide-eyed Joan Blondell or Ruby Keeler tapping her way to the top. This revival, directed with love by Randy Skinner, is so fresh that it feels as if it all just materialized for you. Eloise Kropp plays the starstruck Ruby, who arrives in Depression-era New York with nothing but her tap shoes and a dream. She meets and falls for Dick (Cary Tedder) and wins a place in a chorus line. There she must contend with the temperamental Mona (Lesli Margherita), who, of course, suffers a sudden illness that gives Ruby her first big break—on a Navy ship. Oh, right, and all of this happens in a day. The actors all get it right, and there's a fun, intimate vibe to the proceedings, along with very gay hilarity. (Helen Hayes, 240 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200. Through Jan. 3.)

#### Lazarus

This intermissionless two-hour production, with songs by David Bowie, a script by Enda Walsh, and direction by Ivo van Hove, was inspired by Walter Tevis's 1963 novel, "The Man Who Fell to Earth," about a "humanoid alien" who lands in post-Eisenhower Kentucky. Now the alien, Thomas Newton (Michael C. Hall), watches TV and walks unsteadily from the sleeping area in his New York apartment to the fridge, where he grabs another bottle of gin, occasionally singing Bowie songs that illustrate his ennui. A kind of post-Sondheim protagonist, Newton is built, it seems, to feel nothing, or to neutralize everything that might cause feeling—or interest us. As the minutes tick on, it becomes more and more obvious that we cannot be actively engaged by Thomas or any of the other characters, because none of them have an inner life. As a co-author, Bowie has made the mistake of believing that a theatre piece can be as sketchy as a song. (Reviewed in our issue of 12/21 & 28/15.) (New York Theatre Workshop, 79 E. 4th St. 212-460-5475.)

#### Marjorie Prime

Marjorie (Lois Smith) is eighty-five, and her husband, Walter (Noah Bean), looks to be a good half century younger. He's an attentive listener and a generous talker, although his speech tends to sound slightly stilted, and sometimes, when Marjorie asks him to remind her of a shared moment, he replies, "I'm afraid I don't have that information." In fact, Walter is long dead; this version of Walter is a Prime, a computer simulation sent by Senior Serenity to keep Marjorie company as her own death draws near. The playwright

Jordan Harrison is concerned less with artificial intelligence than with the natural span of a human life, and his play, directed by Anne Kauffman, has all the hallmarks of the best science fiction: it's clever in conceit, alive with humor, surprising in its turns, and terribly haunting by the time the lights go out. (Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

#### MotherStruck!

Staceyann Chin wears her extra-wide maroon Mohawk less like a punk rocker than like a centurion: she's come to conquer, and she does. In this solo show, directed by Cynthia Nixon, the Jamaican-born poet and activist recounts her rocky road to motherhood as a broke single gay woman in Brooklyn (whose own mother abandoned her as an infant). Few performers can achieve such a penetrating connection with their audience, and, while the details are often wrenching and sometimes unflinchingly graphic, she tells her tale with so little pretense and such great humor that it's impossible not to want to ride along with her. The only misstep is the unsubtle sound design; Chin hardly needs the help to make her story come alive. (Lynn Redgrave Theatre, 45 Bleecker St. 866-811-4111.)

#### Once Upon a Mattress

Transport Group's revival of the 1959 show, which refracts the tale of "The Princess and the Pea" through the sunny myopia of America's innocence years, has all the sloppiness and sweetness of a high-school musical—albeit starring two clawed downtown personalities with subversion in their blood. As Winnifred, the brassy, brawny princess who swims the moat to claim her prince, Jackie Hoffman takes every blessed opportunity she can to undermine the good cheer. (Tossing and turning on her downy mattresses, she ad-libs, "When are they going to invent Ambien?") As the evil Queen Aggravain, the drag veteran John (Lypsinka) Epperson expertly channels Old Hollywood divas like Gloria Swanson and Joan Crawford. The tomfoolery can't mask the clunkers in Mary Rodgers and Marshall Barer's score, but it's pleasure enough to see Hoffman and Epperson royally camp it up. (Abrons Arts Center, 466 Grand St. 212-352-3101. Through Jan. 3.)

#### Phalaris's Bull: Solving the Riddle of the Great Big World

The most beautifully mounted philosophy lecture you're ever likely to attend is written and delivered by Steven Friedman, a polymath with a self-described "gift of the mind." He's a poet, a painter, an author, a teacher, and a molecular biologist, but at the core he's looking to answer the biggest questions and

to extract beauty from pain. The text, delivered warmly and wittily, is part autobiography, part meditation, part instruction, and part inspiration, with heavy emphasis on aphorisms that are alternately dense, elementary, challenging, and revealing. But it's not just a glorified TED talk: the designers of the sets (Caleb Wertenbaker), lights (Jimmy Lawlor), sound (Ryan Rumery), and projections (Driscoll Otto), under the brisk direction of David Schweizer, have collaborated with Friedman to create a truly distinctive piece of theatre. (Beckett, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200.)

#### These Paper Bullets!

This new musical, about an extremely Beatles-like band, with effectively allusive songs by Billie Joe Armstrong, borrows the plot and some dialogue from "Much Ado About Nothing," and the mop-top milieu fits surprisingly well with the Shakespeare comedy. The Quartos, as they're called, can't match the madcap charm of the young Beatles (who can?), but Lucas Papaelias's wry asides as the lead guitarist, Balth, come close, and Adam O'Byrne's Don Best, a jealous ex-drummer, is an inspired villain. But, while Rolin Jones's script wrings some fun wordplay out of the mashup (album title: "A Midsummer Day's Night"), far too many gags fail. The show suffers from a tick-off-all-the-boxes approach to its Swinging London setting, and the actors drift in and out of their accents, which is not merely a technical complaint—each joke would be twice as funny if they'd nailed them. (Atlantic Theatre Company, 336 W. 20th St. 866-811-4111.)

#### A Wilder Christmas

A Christmas in the company of Thornton Wilder is not exactly merry. The Peccadillo Theatre Company combines two of Wilder's seasonal one acts—"The Long Christmas Dinner" and "Pullman Car Hiawatha"—into a single evening that is mordant and melancholy, though profoundly humane. In the first, a well-laid table hosts ninety years of holiday suppers as members of the Bayard family are born, age, and die. In the second (a dry run for "Our Town"), a train wends its way toward Chicago as its slumbering passengers receive intimations of the eternal. Dan Wackerman's direction is somewhat obvious, with its tendency to underline, visually and vocally, the more trenchant observations. But he insists that you hear Wilder's unforced modernism, his unashamed Americanness, his deep sympathy. You can catch, too, Wilder's profound influence on contemporary drama, from Tony Kushner to Paula Vogel, Will Eno, Dan LeFranc, and more. (Theatre at St. Clement's, 423 W. 46th St. 866-811-4111.)

#### ALSO NOTABLE ALLEGIANCE Longacre

**AN AMERICAN IN PARIS**  
Palace

**A CHILD'S CHRISTMAS IN WALES**  
DR2. Through Jan. 3.

**CHINA DOLL**  
Schoenfeld

**THE COLOR PURPLE**  
Jacobs. (Reviewed in this issue.)

**DADA WOOF PAPA HOT**  
Mitzi E. Newhouse.  
Through Jan. 3.

**FIDDLER ON THE ROOF**  
Broadway Theatre

**THE FLICK**  
Barrow Street Theatre

**FUN HOME**  
Circle in the Square

**THE GIN GAME**  
Golden

**THE GOLDEN BRIDE**  
Museum of Jewish  
Heritage. Through Jan. 3.

**HAMILTON**  
Richard Rodgers

**HAND TO GOD**  
Booth. Through Jan. 3.

**HIR**  
Peter Jay Sharp. Through  
Jan. 3.

**HOW ALFO LEARNED TO LOVE**  
59E59. Through Jan. 3.

**THE HUMANS**  
Laura Pels. Through Jan. 3.

**THE ILLUSIONISTS—LIVE ON BROADWAY**  
Neil Simon. Through Jan. 3.

**THE KING AND I**  
Vivian Beaumont

**KING CHARLES III**  
Music Box

**LORD OF THE DANCE: DANGEROUS GAMES**  
Lyric. Through Jan. 3.

**MISERY**  
Broadhurst

**NOISES OFF**  
American Airlines Theatre

**ON YOUR FEET!**  
Marquis

**SCHOOL OF ROCK**  
Winter Garden

**SOMETHING ROTTEN!**  
St. James

**SPRING AWAKENING**  
Brooks Atkinson

**STEVE**  
Pershing Square Signature  
Center. Through Jan. 3.

**SYLVIA**  
Cort. Through Jan. 3.

**TAKE CARE**  
Flea

**THÉRÈSE RAQUIN**  
Studio 54. Through Jan. 3.

**A VIEW FROM THE BRIDGE**  
Lyceum

# NIGHT LIFE

## ROCK AND POP

*Musicians and night-club proprietors lead complicated lives; it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.*

### Future

For many rap fans, 2015 will be remembered for a transfer of power, most notable for its pronounced democracy. Jay Z and Kanye West again declined the spotlight, and voices that had been clamoring at the edges found a groundswell of eager supporters in their predecessors' absence. Drake emerged omnipotent, a pop-meme force who could venture into his genre's rougher corners without getting a speck of dust on him. Kendrick Lamar found laser focus for his sprawling range in "To Pimp a Butterfly," and collected eleven Grammy nominations to boot. Viral voices gained celebrity quicker than overnight—the right Vine clip only needs six seconds to work its magic. And Atlanta's Future capped a trio of free releases with March's "56 Nights," the record that at once solidified him as a natural master of ceremonies (what party worth its cover didn't have a lengthy Future set?) and a singular vessel for a certain brand of glamorous pain: the cocksure rock star's equivalent of "Mo Money, Mo Problems," or, maybe, "Pretty Hurts." The thirty-two-year-old has earned the right to celebrate this New Year's Eve: he released his first No. 1 album, "DS2," this summer. (Pier 36, 299 South St. 212-209-7500. Dec. 31.)

### A Sunny Day in Glasgow

The members of this hefty lineup, all modern devotees of nineteen-eighties shoegaze, have consistently ebbed and flowed, spread across at least three cities and two continents. To record their celebrated 2014 album, "Sea When Absent," the band was yoked together by little more than what must've been a gruelling e-mail chain. You could draw a parallel between this fundamentally contemporary, threaded creative process and the resulting densely stacked vocals, employed with utility, carrying playful hooks that cut through wet guitar at the perfect moments, like

catching a strong cell-phone signal. Ben Daniels, the guitarist and hesitant bandleader, has guided the project from a Philadelphia bedroom in 2006 through at least ten releases. The latest, the double EP "Planning Weed Like It's Acid/Life Is Loss," declutters the group's sound; "Jewelry Duty," for all its psych-pop sentimentalism, is its true gem. The band gathers at Rough Trade this week, all together, in the flesh. (64 N. 9th St., Brooklyn. roughtradenyc.com. Jan. 2.)

### Garland Jeffreys

The best rock show of 2014 might have come on New Year's Eve, at an early-evening performance at Joe's Pub. The hardy, dynamic Sheepshead Bay native Jeffreys, a musical poet of the New York streets, has been releasing albums since the seventies: punchy amalgams of rock, soul, reggae, and proto-rap. Backed by a crack band—the longtime associates **Mark Bosch** (guitar), **Brian Stanley** (bass), **Tom Curiano** (drums), and **Charly Roth** (keys)—Jeffreys brings his great songs, powerful voice, and buoyant personality back to the Pub for another shot of celebratory magic. His daughter, **Savanna Jeffreys**, an impressive composer and singer herself, opens. (425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555. Dec. 31.)

### Lit City Trax

At the core of club culture is a sort of utopian dream: any two humans

from any corner of the globe can be allied by something as simple as a beat. Sneer if you like, but rhythm has helped keep our species going: why else would we have developed and cultivated this innate dimension of time and space, if not to wield it? Maybe d.j.s are supreme beings after all. Jamie Imanian-Friedman, better known as J-Cush, founded his record label and rave institution Lit City Trax as an argument for this global commonality, culling d.j.s and producers from countless niche club scenes, including London's grime, Chicago's footwork, Angola's *kuduro*, and South Africa's *kwaito*. His production/d.j. outfit, Future Brown, imagined a shadeless tomorrow on its February self-titled debut album, where genres clash and coalesce without distinction—just more tones to blend together. Lit City brings a spread of friends to Verboten for this late engagement, and is probably already onto 2017's new sounds. (54 N. 11th St., Brooklyn. 347-223-4732. Jan. 2.)

### Wiki

This Upper West Side native stepped out from his Ratking trio to deliver a solo recording, "Lil Me," at the tail end of the year. Throughout the record, Wiki assesses the city's constant regeneration, and is just as schizophrenic as any New Yorker with a conscience. The nasal-voiced twenty-two-year-old adores and abhors his city in equal measure,

challenged to reconcile the "old blocks" he grew up wandering with the "new kids" that now share his sidewalks. Terse, snowflake beats drag inventive new rhythms from grime and noise influences, and Wiki's thick, buoyant cadence keeps the subject matter from getting too heavy. The rapper, modest in stature, is a ball of rage in concert, prone to whacking his own head with his microphone mid-verse; expect flying skate decks and cheap booze at this Greenpoint D.I.Y. space, well before the ball drops. (Aviv, 496 Morgan Ave., Brooklyn. aviv.nyc. Dec. 31.)

### XXYYXX

This ill-defined (and infuriatingly named) electronic producer gained a profile in 2012, at just sixteen years old, for his masterly use of the cloud synths and trap snares that continue to merge rap and club circles today. XXYYXX's most famous song, "About You," turns a snatch of reversed female vocals into a contagion, impossible to shake out of your head once you've caught it in the air. His latest single has popped up on Beats 1 courtesy of Oliver El-Khatib, co-founder of Drake's October's Very Own record label: "Red" is exactly the kind of moody, evocative score on which the rapper has built a style, and a career. Output hosts a headlining performance from the Orlando-born, Los Angeles-based producer, one of the last shows of the Brooklyn club's



The rabid Manhattanite Wiki mugs into the New Year, at the Greenpoint art space Aviv on Dec. 31.



knockout year. (74 Wythe Ave., Brooklyn. [outputclub.com](http://outputclub.com). Dec. 30.)

## JAZZ AND STANDARDS

### The Bad Plus

Although the latest recording from this now well-regarded yet still vitally surprising trio features the saxophonist Josh Redman, here the stage will be owned by the original bad men of contemporary jazz: the pianist **Ethan Iverson**, the bassist **Reid Anderson**, and the drummer **Dave King**. Canny group originals have long superseded the outré rock and pop covers that originally gained the band notoriety, but encores continue to hold out possibilities for left-of-center rave-ups. (Village

Vanguard, 178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. 212-255-4037. Dec. 30-Jan. 3.)

### Chris Botti

You know the holiday season is upon us when this pop-jazz trumpeter pulls into town and makes the Blue Note his home away from home for a few weeks—as he has for the past eleven years. Giving his audience all the recognizable melody they crave and enough display of his firm chops to prove his instrumental bona fides, Botti provides jazz as nourishing comfort food. (131 W. 3rd St. 212-475-8592. Dec. 30-Jan. 5.)

### Duchess

Three fine singers—Melissa Styliano, Amy Corvine, and Hilary Gardner—

join together in swinging harmony to whip up music that traffics in delight. Referencing vocal icons from Peggy Lee to the Boswell Sisters, this fresh-voiced triumvirate plays it straight from the heart, leaving any trace of camp or postmodern irony at the door. (Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St. 212-576-2232. Dec. 30.)

### Wynton Marsalis Quintet

The best way to experience Wynton Marsalis as the trumpet phenomenon he surely remains is with his full-blooded quintet, which will be augmented here by special guests: **Jared Grimes**, a frighteningly gifted tap dancer, and the bassist-vocalist **Kate Davis**, whose YouTube swing version of Meghan Trainor's "All

About That Bass" has racked up a cool fourteen-million-plus hits. (Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola, Broadway at 60th St. 212-258-9595. Dec. 31.)

### Ken Vandermark

Becoming a MacArthur Fellow, in 1999, didn't noticeably change the game plan for this far-seeing saxophonist and clarinet player; he still makes Chicago his home and remains as committed to the jazz avant-garde as he has been since his emergence in the early nineties. Vandermark's New York residency finds collaborative space for such questing players as **Joe Morris**, **Ikue Mori**, and **Joe McPhee**. (The Stone, Avenue C at 2nd St. [thestonenyc.com](http://thestonenyc.com). Dec. 5.)

## CLASSICAL MUSIC

## OPERA

### Metropolitan Opera

For this year's family-friendly holiday show, the Met presents its trimmed-down, English-language version of Rossini's bel-canto sparkler "**The Barber of Seville**." Clocking in at two hours, the show puts young faces in starring roles, including Isabel Leonard as Rosina, Elliot Madore as Figaro, and David Portillo as Count Almaviva; in the Jan. 1 performance, they are replaced, respectively, by Ginger Costa-Jackson, David Pershall, and Taylor Stayton. Antony Walker conducts Bartlett Sher's vibrant production. (Dec. 30 at 12:30, Jan. 1 at 7, and Jan. 2 at 8. These are the final performances.) • Jeremy Sams's production of Johann Strauss II's "**Die Fledermaus**" maximizes the operetta's Viennese milieu by setting the action on New Year's Eve, 1899. But the forced fun that marred the production's premiere, in 2013, has given way to a lighter, more confident touch from Susanna Phillips, Paulo Szot, Toby Spence, Lucy Crowe, and Susan Graham (who sports a spiky white wig as the Russian prince Orlofsky, hysterically channeling the glamorous real-life Siberian baritone Dmitri Hvorostovsky). The effervescent score sometimes goes flat in James Levine's hands, but Betsy Wolfe and Christopher Fitzgerald, in the speaking roles of Ida and Frosch, bring plenty of dizzy, contagious energy to the show. (Dec. 30 at 7:30 and Jan. 2 at 1.) • The Peter Gelb administration, continuing its penchant for opening new productions on New Year's Eve, unveils its staging of the young Georges Bizet's splendid Orientalist fantasy, "**Les Pêcheurs de Perles**" ("The Pearl Fishers"), in which the composer first showed

the kind of talent that would propel "Carmen" to renown only a few years later. The radiant Diana Damrau is the Hindu princess Leila, with Matthew Polenzani and Mariusz Kwiecien as the old friends who each desire her; Gianandrea Noseda, always a potent presence on the Met's podium, conducts. (Dec. 31 at 7 and Jan. 4 at 7:30.) • In "**Anna Bolena**," Donizetti's fanciful take on British history, Henry VIII entraps his second wife with a former lover in order to have her executed. Earlier this season, Sondra Radvanovsky gave a towering performance as the wronged queen; Ildar Abdrazakov sang the king with thuggish authority; and Jamie Barton was in sumptuous voice as his new paramour, Giovanna (Jane) Seymour. They all return, with Stephen Costello taking the role of Anna's onetime lover Percy; Marco Armiliato. (Jan. 5 at 7:30.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

### Gotham Early Music Scene: "The Play of Daniel"

This enduringly popular holiday entertainment, first mounted in a legendary production at the Cloisters in 1958, is an hour-long musical drama that gives two famous Biblical stories a French-medieval slant. A small period ensemble—including lutes, harps, rebecs, and recorders—weaves a captivating aural tapestry that provides a convincing backdrop for Drew Minter's staging of the twelfth-century work. (Trinity Church, Broadway at Wall St. 212-866-0468. Jan. 2 at 7 and Jan. 3 at 3 and 7.)

### New York Gilbert & Sullivan Players: "The Pirates of Penzance"

America's celebrated Savoy company brings back "Pirates" to its

repertoire, a show that should provide plenty of holiday cheer. David Wannen regains the role of the Pirate King; Albert Bergeret, the troupe's longtime director, conducts. (Skirball Center, New York University, 566 LaGuardia Pl. [nygasp.org](http://nygasp.org). Dec. 30 at 3, Dec. 31 at 7:30, and Jan. 2 at 2.)

## ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

### New York Philharmonic

Susan Graham, the most delightfully Francophone of American singers, is joining Alan Gilbert and the orchestra for this year's New Year's Eve concert, celebrating the glamour and culture of Paris—which, despite everything, remains the city of our dreams. The pianists Inon Barnatan and Makoto Ozone are also on hand for a program featuring music by Ravel ("Pavane pour une Infante Défunte") and Saint-Saëns ("Carnival of the Animals," with Nathan Lane reading a freshly commissioned narration) as well as gems from the operettas of Offenbach and Simons and the repertoire of Edith Piaf. (Dec. 31 at 7:30.) • Gilbert sneaks in one more tribute to the Sibelius anniversary before the year closes, a program featuring the joyous "Finlandia," the mysterious "Swan of Tuonela," and the enigmatic Fourth Symphony. Joshua Bell lightens the mood with Mendelssohn's indestructibly romantic Violin Concerto. (Dec. 29-30 at 7:30 and Jan. 2 at 8.) (David Geffen Hall. 212-875-5656.)

### Trinity Church Twelfth Night Festival

Subtitled "Time's Arrow," this year's festival, organized by Trinity's imaginative and ever-energetic director

of music, Julian Wachner, boldly combines early music, classic repertoire, and contemporary works, featuring the renowned Choir of Trinity Wall Street and the NOVUS NY ensemble. Offerings (many of which are free), held variously at Trinity Church and at St. Paul's Chapel, include "Mass Reimaginings," a concert that puts Lassus' "Prophetiae Sibyllarum" next to a world-première work by Daniel Felsenfeld (with text by Rick Moody); a concert on the theme of fire which features masterworks by Handel and Haydn ("Feuersymphonie") as well as a contemporary meditation by Michael Daugherty; and the New York premiere of David Lang's "The National Anthems," a Trinity co-commission, sung by the women's choral ensemble Lorelei. (Broadway at Wall St. Dec. 30-Jan. 6; for tickets and full schedule, see [twelfthnightfestival.org](http://twelfthnightfestival.org).)

## RECITALS

### Bargemusic

The pianist Steven Beck, who plays the Goldberg Variations every Christmas Eve at the barge, stays on to join the floating chamber-music series' director, Mark Peskanov, in another Bach-fest: a complete concert of the Six Sonatas for Violin and Keyboard, BWV 1014-19. Next up is the barge's winter edition of "Here and Now," a contemporary mini-festival that, along with world-première works by Frederic Rzewski and Scott Wheeler, has a notable jazz element this year. (Fulton Ferry Landing, Brooklyn. [bargemusic.org](http://bargemusic.org). Dec. 31 at 7:30; Jan. 1-2 and Jan. 4 at 8 and Jan. 3 at 4.)



# MOVIES

## NOW PLAYING

### The Big Short

Years before the financial crisis of 2008, early rumblings are detected by Michael Burry (Christian Bale), whose investment skills are in sharp contrast to his social unease. Unlike most of his peers, he spies the cracks in the housing market and wagers that, before too long, it will all come tumbling down. Word of his gamble inspires a few more players to take the plunge, including a miserable hedge-fund manager (Steve Carell), a pair of greenhorns from out of town (John Magaro and Finn Wittrock), and our sly narrator (Ryan Gosling), who works at Deutsche Bank. These are just some of the unlovely figures who pace back and forth through Adam McKay's new film, based on the nonfiction book by Michael Lewis. The movie pops and fizzles with invention, and even takes time out, now and then, to educate—screaming to a halt and summoning a celebrity (Selena Gomez, say, or Margot Robbie) to steer us through the economic verbiage. Everything you always wanted to know about credit-default swaps but were afraid to ask: it's all here. So winning are these tactics, and so cheerfully headlong is the mood, that we're hardly aware of rooting for a bunch of utter cynics who are poised to make tens of millions of dollars from the misfortunes of others. —*Anthony Lane* (Reviewed in our issue of 12/14/15.) (In wide release.)

### Carol

One day in the nineteen-fifties, Carol Aird (Cate Blanchett), a wife and mother, is shopping for Christmas presents at a department store in Manhattan. She comes across a salesgirl, Therese Belivet (Rooney Mara), and they fall in love, right there. (How long has it been, you ask yourself, since a movie delivered a proper *coup de foudre*?) Todd Haynes's film then follows the women as they meet for lunch, hang out at Carol's home, embark on an aimless journey, and go to bed—conscious, all the while, of what they are risking, flouting, or leaving behind. Therese has a boyfriend (Jake Lacy), and Carol has a husband (Kyle Chandler) and a child, although the maternal instinct gets short dramatic shrift. That feels true to Patricia Highsmith, whose 1952 novel, "The Price of Salt," is the foundation of the film. The fine screenplay is by Phyllis Nagy, who

drains away the sourness of the book; what remains is a production of clean and frictionless beauty, down to the last, strokable inch of clothing and skin. Yet Haynes and his stars, for all their stylish restraint, know that elegance alone will not suffice. Inside the showcase is a storm of feeling. With Sarah Paulson, as Carol's best friend. —*A.L.* (11/23/15) (In limited release.)

### Chimes at Midnight

One of Orson Welles's best and least seen movies. Welles brought together the pieces of Falstaff that Shakespeare had strewn over the two parts of "Henry IV" and "The Merry Wives of Windsor," with cuttings from "Henry V" and "Richard II," and fastened them into place with narration from Holinshed's "Chronicles" (read by Ralph Richardson). Though Welles's performance as Falstaff is short on comedy, it's very rich, very full. Oddly, we never really see the friendship of Falstaff and Prince Hal—played extraordinarily well by Keith Baxter—but John Gielgud's refined, monkish Henry IV gives the film the austerity it needs for the conflict within Hal to be dramatized. The film is a near-masterpiece. Welles's direction of the battle of Shrewsbury is unlike anything he has ever done—indeed, unlike any battle ever done on the screen before that time. It ranks with the finest work of Griffith, John Ford, Eisenstein, Kurosawa. The compositions suggest Uccello, and the chilling, ironic music is a death knell for all men in battle. The soldiers, plastered by the mud they fall in, are already monuments. It's the most brutally sombre battle ever filmed, and it does justice to Hotspur's great line "O, Harry, thou hast robbed me of my youth." Released in 1965. —*Pauline Kael* (Film Forum; Jan. 1-12.)

### In the Heart of the Sea

The new Ron Howard film tells a tale that lay behind "Moby-Dick"—the final voyage of a whaling vessel named the Essex. It departs from Nantucket in 1820 under the command of George Pollard (Benjamin Walker), the scion of a wealthy family, a novice compared to his first mate, Owen Chase (Chris Hemsworth). Friction arises between them, especially after the captain's inexperience takes his crew into a furious storm. Rumors of rich pickings, and of a vast white whale,

then lure the ship into the wastes of the Pacific, where the creature awaits—no idle legend, it turns out, but a real beast, or as real as the C.G.I. can make it. The sketchiness of the effects, indeed, is a sorry surprise; waves and townscapes, as well as whales, feel insubstantial and thin. One scene, where a boy descends into the clammy red pit of a whale's head, exerts a genuine grip, but even then Howard cuts it short. (Imagine what David Cronenberg would have made of it.) The boy survives the Essex's voyage, grows up traumatized, and as an adult—played by the splendid Brendan Gleeson—recounts the fate of the Essex to Herman Melville (Ben Whishaw). That framing device seems more solid and emotionally grounded than anything that happens at sea. —*A.L.* (12/21 & 28/15) (In limited release.)

### Joy

Painful personal overtones resonate in David O. Russell's boisterous comic view—based on a true story—of an entrepreneur's conflict-riddled rise to success. Jennifer Lawrence stars as a divorced young mother on Long Island who's in a rut. Smart, creative, and handy, she works at an airport counter and copes with her divorced parents (Virginia Madsen and Robert De Niro), her father's new girlfriend (Isabella Rossellini), her bitter half-sister (Elisabeth Röhm), her ex-husband (Édgar Ramírez), and her supportive but ailing grandmother (Diane Ladd). Overwhelmed by a Cinderella-like burden of chores, Joy designs a new kind of mop, finds an investor, and is thrust into the predatory world of attorneys and executives. Russell, who wrote the script and co-wrote the story with Annie Mumolo, captures the magical moment when Joy's private inspiration finds public expression; the movie's best scene features Bradley Cooper, as a TV executive who shows Joy the ropes. The core of the film is Joy's mastery of the killer instinct, her deft plotting of bold confrontations. But Russell's portrait of Joy is mainly a public one, stinting on intimacy in favor of the business-school case study. With Dascha Polanco, as Joy's best friend and savior. —*R.B.* (In wide release.)

### Macbeth

The Scottish play bewitches once again; Justin Kurzel is hardly the first movie director to be lured into

its mists. This new adaptation stars Michael Fassbender, at his moodiest and most hard-bitten, as the title character, with Marion Cotillard as his wife. The film begins and ends on the battlefield, as if that were Macbeth's natural hunting ground; everything in between has the quality of a bad and agonizing dream. (Could Lady Macbeth, perhaps, be sleepwalking through the whole thing?) King Duncan (David Thewlis) is knifed not in a castle but in a tent, and Shakespeare's verse is muttered, spat, and moaned without a gleam of rhetorical flourish. Nothing, in short, speaks of grandeur in this depleted land, and there's something crazed, and almost ridiculous, about fighting and killing for the chance to govern it. Fassbender seems more at ease with a blade in his hand than with a mouthful of poetry, while Sean Harris makes a vehement Macduff. Kurzel adds children throughout, to great effect: one to the trio of witches, and one—a corpse—to the opening scene, lamented by Macbeth. The movie brims, quite rightly, with blood and flame; the screen, by the close, is a terrible sea of red. —*A.L.* (12/7/15) (In limited release.)

### A Scandal in Paris

In this historical crime comedy, from 1946, the German émigré director Douglas Sirk paints an ironic, cynical view of Old World mores and New World moralism alike. It's based on the real-life memoirs of his protagonist, an oft-imprisoned thief with dashing wit, exquisite manners, sexual magnetism, and boundless audacity, an elusive man of many names who eventually settled on that of Eugène François Vidocq (played by the debonair, grandiloquent George Sanders). Escaping from jail with his cellmate, the brutal Émile (Akim Tamiroff), Vidocq rises from petty crime to high society in quest of a vast haul of heirlooms. Insinuating himself into a nobleman's household, Vidocq becomes Paris's chief of police—a fox guarding the henhouse—but his host's steadfast and romantic daughter, Thérèse (Signe Hasso), sparks a change of plans. With a display of suave images and wry performances, Sirk delights in the elegant formalities that withhold judgment in favor of pleasure and knowledge. His intricate shadows and ornamental overload suggest nuances that are the very essence of high culture and enduring beauty,

complete with their illusions and dangers.—*R.B.* (Film Society of Lincoln Center; Dec. 30.)

## Sisters

This hectic and sentimental comedy, though built on a firm foundation of familiar experience and stifled pain, is a sad waste of sparkling talent. Tina Fey and Amy Poehler star as the fortyish Ellis sisters. The elder, Kate (Fey), a cosmetician, is the free-spirited single mother of a teen-age girl, Haley (Madison Davenport); the younger, Maura (Poehler), a childless and recently divorced nurse, is compassionate to a fault. When their parents (Dianne Wiest and James Brolin) sell the family home in Orlando, the Ellis sisters rush there to clear out the room that they shared throughout childhood. Once they're back in their home town, their old friends turn up, and their old memories well up, along with frustrations and grudges. Maura needs to cut loose, Kate needs to calm down, and both seek to fulfill their needs by throwing a wild party in the empty house. The belabored raunchiness of the physical and verbal humor is further burdened with facile psychologizing. There are solid subjects at hand—adults' seemingly unending adolescence, the burden of solitude in middle age, the unspoken demands of family ties—but they remain undeveloped. Directed by Jason Moore; with Maya Rudolph, Ike Barinholtz, and John Cena.—*R.B.* (In wide release.)

## Son of Saul

The first feature film by László Nemes confronts a subject that many people would prefer not to think about, let alone to cast in dramatic form. In death camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau, the Sonderkommando were teams of prisoners who were forced to deal with other prisoners as they arrived—herding them into the gas chambers, sorting through their discarded clothes, and fer-

rying their bodies to the furnaces. A movie that staged all this in detail would not be watchable, or even defensible; what Nemes does, therefore, is to focus on one such assistant, a Hungarian Jew named Saul Ausländer (Géza Röhrig), whom we see in almost every shot. The film shows not the horror of the events around him but his reaction to them; his dark stare does the work on our behalf. There is a plot here—two separate plots, in fact, which might be thought excessive, although they crystallize the fervor and the despair of the inmates. First, there is an uprising and a breakout, against formidable odds. Second, Saul recognizes, among the dead, his own son, and much of the movie is driven by his quest for a rabbi to say the mourner's Kaddish for the child. Somehow, Nemes finds a balance: his exhausting movie pays its respects but also burns with rage.—*A.L.* (12/21 & 28/15) (In limited release.)

## Star Wars: The Force Awakens

The director J. J. Abrams infuses the latest installment of George Lucas's intergalactic franchise with the spirit of Steven Spielberg in this awestruck, warmhearted, and good-humored action spectacle. It's centered on the search for Luke Skywalker by the organized Resistance to the evil dominion of the First Order. That oppressive successor to the Empire wants to extinguish the last of the Jedi, whose help the Resistance fighters need. Abrams recruits a remarkable new posse of actors—including Oscar Isaac, John Boyega, Daisy Ridley, and Adam Driver—to play a batch of new characters, yet for all their flair and presence they have little acting to do (though Driver shines in his moment of theatrical excess). Abrams, who co-wrote the script with Lawrence Kasdan and Michael Arndt, stage-manages some breathlessly clever plotting, but he also plays every gesture and every gag, every sigh and every whoop to the

balcony, and he milks decades of nostalgia with the stagy entrances of Carrie Fisher, Harrison Ford, and Mark Hamill. Some of the grandest moments can be seen coming around the corner, the colossal battles and colorful catastrophes feel anticlimactic, and the meticulously designed futuristic weaponry and outfits never rise to symbolic significance. Despite the copious servings of tragic threats and good feelings, the production sinks under the weight of its emotional calculation.—*R.B.* (In wide release.)

## Youth

Most of the new Paolo Sorrentino film is set in a peaceable spa, where Fred Ballinger (Michael Caine), a famous British composer, is taking it easy. He has largely given up work, whereas his old friend Mick Boyle (Harvey Keitel)—a movie director, trailed by a screenwriter and other hangers-on—is still entrapped in the coils of creative endeavor. Also present are Miss Universe (Madalina Diana Ghenea), a discontented film star (Paul Dano), and a lackey from Buckingham Palace who begs Fred to fulfill a royal request (Alex Macqueen). Sorrentino circles these various figures with his usual suavity, compiling a collective meditation on the woes of old age and the frustrations of art. (If his last movie, "The Great Beauty," bowed to "La Dolce Vita," the tribute paid here to "8½" is more flagrant still.) The result feels both sumptuous and aimless, as if we were leafing idly through an album of delectable sights—of sounds, too, as when Fred gathers the natural noises of a valley into a tone poem of his own imagining. Three women lend the film fire: Rachel Weisz, as Fred's grievance-driven daughter; Jane Fonda, as an indestructible diva; and Paloma Faith, as a pop star in a funny pastiche of a music video—the energetic hot spot of the film.—*A.L.* (12/7/15) (In limited release.)



Jia Zhangke's modernist melodrama "Mountains May Depart," a family saga stretching from 1999 to 2025, follows a Chinese woman in relationships with a rich man and a poor one. It screens Jan. 1 in MOMA's series "The Contenders," featuring 2015 studio releases and highlights from the year's film festivals.



# DANCE

## New York City Ballet / "The Nutcracker"

Once again, Marie will save the day with her little white slipper, the tree will grow through the roof, and the wooden nutcracker will magically transform into a valiant, albeit miniature, prince. Together, the two will travel to the land of sweets, where they will be regaled with an assortment of dances, under the benevolent eye of the Sugarplum Fairy. The George Balanchine production, which made this ballet popular in the U.S. more than sixty years ago, offers a well-calibrated mix of charm, grandeur, and undiluted dancing. It's also a great place to see promising young dancers cut their teeth on their first big roles. (David H. Koch, Lincoln Center. 212-496-0600. Dec. 30-31 and Jan. 2-3.)

## Noche Flamenca / "Antigona"

Soledad Barrio, the star of this New York-based flamenco troupe, takes the

role of Sophocles' Antigone, in an adaptation by her husband, Martín Santangelo, which turns the Greek drama into a kind of flamenco opera. (West Park Presbyterian Church, 165 W. 86th St. 212-868-4444. Dec. 30-31, Jan. 1-2, and Jan. 4-5. Through Jan. 23.)

## American Dance Machine for the 21st Century

When musicals are revived on Broadway, the original choreography is often dumped. People think of these dances as expendable, even though they're often the best part of the show. Since 2012, this initiative has worked to create a "living archive" of Broadway dance numbers, bringing in former cast members (including Robert LaFosse and Gemze de Lappe) to teach the steps and topnotch dancers from all over town to perform them. This year's lineup includes selections from "Singin' in the Rain" and "West Side Story," as well as the

dream ballet from "Oklahoma!" (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. Dec. 30-31 and Jan. 2-3.)

## Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre

The final week of this year's City Center season offers one more chance (on Jan. 2) to catch up on this year's new works in their full form: Ronald K. Brown's "Open Doo," Kyle Abraham's "Untitled America: First Movement," and Robert Battle's "Awakening," none a real winner. The season finale (on Jan. 3) mixes excerpts of these and other pieces in a "greatest hits" format. Before that, though, on New Year's Eve, comes a tribute (hardly the first) to the company's former artistic director, Judith Jamison, who joined the troupe fifty years ago. Jamison's signature solo, "Cry," is on the program, performed by the fiery Linda Celeste Sims. (131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. Dec. 30-31 and Jan. 2-3.)

## Daniil Simkin's INTENSIO

The Russian star's new venture is a small contemporary-ballet ensemble—or "art project," as Simkin describes it—in which he and a handful of colleagues perform works by choreographers with whom he has an aesthetic affinity. It's also something of a family affair: an interactive video for one of the pieces was designed by Simkin's father, who shares his son's interest in immersive computer graphics and technology. The dancers, with one exception, hail from Simkin's home company, American Ballet Theatre. (It's an excellent group that includes the luminous Isabella Boylston and Calvin Royal.) The dances, by Alexander Ekman, Annabelle Lopez Ochoa, Jorma Elo, and Gregory Dolbashian, may not be particularly profound, but they have a hip, stylish, modern edge. (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. Jan. 5. Through Jan. 10.)

# ABOVE & BEYOND

## Video Games Live

Tommy Tallarico and Jack Wall both compose music for video games, and they have conceived a new type of performance with this riveting combination of music and machine. An orchestra and choir conducted by their fellow-composer Emmanuel Fratianni perform arrangements of iconic video-game music, flanked by synchronized gaming sequences, lighting, and effects. For ten years, the immersive experience has reworked themes from best-selling franchises like *Final Fantasy*, *Zelda*, *Tetris*, and *Metal Gear Solid*, including interactive elements and costumed performers. The elaborate format asks skeptics to consider that there may be more to the pricey electronic boxes gathered under Christmas trees than their title screens suggest: V.G.L. played to a hundred thousand people in Taiwan, and the Brazilian government has helped to subsidize the event to encourage young people's interest in the arts. (New Jersey Performing Arts Center, 1 Center Street, Newark, N.J. 888-466-5722. Jan. 2.)

## READINGS AND TALKS

### New Year's Day Marathon Benefit Reading

Founded in 1966 at this East Village landmark, the Poetry Project set out to institutionalize the tradition of coffeehouse readings which kept the Lower East side alive with ideas in the first half of the sixties. Of course, the practice extends well beyond that time and place—the project's annual New Year's Day marathon reading seems to celebrate the near-infinite scope of the form. The organization invites dozens of artists, poets, and performers, including **Penny Arcade** and **Philip Glass**, for their forty-second marathon reading: twelve hours, to be exact, with all proceeds going toward paying writers throughout the season. (St. Mark's Church-In-the-Bowery, 131 E. 10th St. 212-674-6377. Jan. 1 at 2.)

### Thurston Moore

The New York publishers that founded Great Weather for MEDIA,

who pride themselves on bolstering unpredictable voices, tap the Sonic Youth co-founder Moore with this reading from "Stereo Sanctity," his recently published collection of poems and lyrics spanning three decades. Since 2011, the singer-songwriter has been on the faculty of the summer writing program at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, at Naropa University, in Boulder, Colorado, and even found time to start a new band—surely all welcome life changes after a highly publicized (and maligned) split with his longtime wife and bandmate, Kim Gordon. Moore has invited the authors **John Coletti** ("Deep Code") and **Erica Kaufman** ("Instant Classic") to join him, as well as the Great Weather for MEDIA associate editor **George Wallace**. (Parkside Lounge, 317 E. Houston St. 212-673-6270. Jan. 2 at 9.)

### Sarah MacLean

In a Talk of the Town story by Alison Rose, published in *The New*

*Yorker* in 1993, the romance-novel icon and author Fabio describes his ideal creative environment: "I have a deck with a swimming pool overlooking Los Angeles," he said. "I write there beside my swimming pool with my three dogs around me." It's easy to imagine the picturesque setting bringing a special warmth to the hundreds of romance novels he penned and posed for in the late eighties and beyond, but the romance novelist Sarah MacLean has reigned the genre with a bolder edge. She interprets the romance novel as a crucial component of feminist literature—MacLean's historical-romance novels have been translated into more than twenty languages, and she has stormed the *Times* bestseller list. Fans will get a preview of her upcoming book, "The Rogue Not Taken," at this highly anticipated reading; reservations are encouraged. (WORD Bookstore, 126 Franklin St., Brooklyn. 718-383-0096. Jan. 5 at 7.)





## TABLES FOR TWO

# QUALITY EATS

19 Greenwich Ave. (212-337-9988)

THE MENU AT THIS SVELTE new West Village restaurant reads like a glutton's day in Heaven, if such a thing were allowed: grilled bûcheron cheese, Nueske's bacon with peanut butter and jalapeño jelly, creamed-spinach hush puppies, butternut brioche bread pudding. Then there are the steaks—bavette, coulotte, Don Ameche, each less than thirty dollars. They sound so exotic, and yet they are so cheap! What's going on here? The owners—partners at midtown's fine-dining mini-empire of Quality Meats, Quality Italian, and Park Avenue Winter (Spring, Summer, Autumn)—have decided to offer a true public service, by opening a relatively affordable steak house. When scrutinized, the economics of it are rather ingenious, and, paradoxically, somewhat compliant with the current edict to eat less meat. The heroic catch is that here, with the glamorous low-lit banquettes and the tasteful invitation to debauchery, you don't even notice.

Upon hearing the term "flap meat," you will understand why someone might want to sex it up with a name like bavette. At nineteen dollars, it's the cheapest steak on the menu; to eat it, you must chew, and chew. (This cut is a muscle toward the rear near the belly—the bottom sirloin butt, if only Letterman were still around to ask.) Chewiness is a common characteristic of the steaks, which also include the coulotte (denser than the bavette), a hangar, and a skirt. Most are seared for a crunchy salted crust and sliced generously, fanned across the plate so you don't notice what a petite portion you're getting. But it works, because the quality of the meat is excellent, and why would you need more than five giant slices of beef anyway? The short rib has the beefiest flavor, and is served on the (very long) bone; the Don Ameche (graciously bringing "Trading Places" and "Cocoon" back into the public consciousness) features thick slices of filet mignon atop toast spread with chicken-liver mousse. A fine double-decker patty melt highlights two patties with great personality, layered with griddled sourdough, melty cheese, and a spicy mayo-tinged cabbage slaw. It might be the way to go.

There's more than just beef. A delicate grilled branzino comes with tangy artichoke sauce, and, of the many decadent sides, special mention must go to the addictive monkey bread, hot super-soft rolls that are pulled apart and slathered with pungent bacon butter that melts on contact. The cocktails are of the overly clever, boldly liquored variety; the Home Alone is "Christmas in a glass," one diner said, of his heavily pine-scented mix of bourbon, spruce bitters, and cinnamon. Meanwhile, salads and scalloped sunchokes meet dreamy cheese; chunks of avocado and crab are made for each other in a citrus dressing. There's a crazy wine deal, involving gimmicky yet utterly practical stacked carafes and three wines from a very good list for forty bucks. Reformed gluttons unite.

—Shauna Lyon

Open weekdays for dinner and weekends for brunch and dinner. Entrées \$17-\$29.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ERIC HELGAS



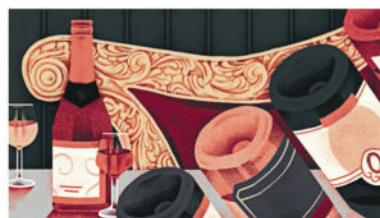
# FOOD & DRINK

## BAR TAB RIDDLING WIDOW

127 Macdougal St. (212-598-1809)

In 1805, when Madame Barbe-Nicole Clicquot Ponsardin's husband, François, died, she found herself, at age twenty-seven, the Veuve ("widow") Clicquot. She threw herself into winemaking, and developed a method (which came to be called riddling) for removing the dead yeast that long clouded champagne: she cut holes in her kitchen table and stored bottles cork down, twisting them so the sediment collected in their necks. Fast-forward to present-day Greenwich Village, where a cellar bar (beneath the Bourgeois Pig) with a focus on bubbly stuff features a decorative riddling rack, studded with bottles. The snug boîte conjures Harlequin novels about Victorian vampires (red velvet chaise, black marble counter, palais black velvet wallpaper). Recently, the beverage director, Tanner Walle, sang along to eighties hip-hop and offered generous pours of a sparkling Styrian rosé with a black-cherry bite and a grassy brut from grapes grown at eight thousand feet. He dryly informed a patron wearing fishnets and a fascinator that he no longer stocked oysters, "because no one wants to eat oysters in a dark basement." A man in an artfully knotted scarf embraced Walle, who handed him a drink. "Name that grape," Walle challenged. "Gamay?" "Thar she blows, dude!" They continued to bro out about wine until the scarf guy recoiled from his glass, with a sour look. Walle asked, "Is it corked or cooked?" A riddle left unanswered.

—Emma Allen







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## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT IN WITH THE NEW

One of the things that make a New Yorker's holiday heart clench just a little is the speed with which today's beacon of light becomes tomorrow's burnout case, kicked to the curb. The Christmas-tree business, of which we sing here, is in this city a wonderfully entrepreneurial one: in the weeks leading up to the holiday, sellers, some from as far away as Alaska, line up along the sidewalks, creating a fragrant, "Nutcracker"-worthy urban forest, and buyers happily traipse off with their trees wrapped in nylon mesh. But then, after the first week of January, those same trees, anxiously selected and triumphantly lofted home, are heaped brutally on the sidewalk, bits of tinsel still clinging to their needles, for the Department of Sanitation to haul away.

As with everything else in the city, a tight web of rules governs the rituals. The Coniferous Tree Exception in the city's laws assures the right to sell trees on the street ("Storekeepers and peddlers may sell and display coniferous trees during the month of December"), and the Department of Sanitation actively encourages the sidewalk toss, while the Department of Parks and Recreation offers a greener option—MulchFest 2016 TreeCycle!—at designated locations around town. (The city's most famous tree, the one at Rockefeller Center, is turned into lumber for Habitat for Humanity.) The sudden fall from glory to the gutter can prompt a kind of melancholy reflection, not just on the vanity of human wishes but on the mutability of human monuments.

It was oddly cheering, then, to learn recently that even the most impressive- and immovable-seeming of monuments associated with the winter solstice has some of this here-today-and-gone-tomorrow character. Stonehenge, still standing after thousands of years, was, apparently, quarried and originally constructed at a Neolithic

site in Wales; many centuries later, it was taken apart and pulled on sledges about a hundred and forty miles east, to be rebuilt at its present location, on the Salisbury Plain, in England. Stonehenge's central bluestones, the ones that form its inner "horseshoe," can be matched with rock formations in Pembrokeshire that show traces of ancient quarrying. (Spinal Tap notwithstanding, it wasn't the Druids who built Stonehenge but some other, more ancient group.) According to Mike Parker Pearson, a professor at University College London, who was the lead archeologist on the Stonehenge Riverside Project, which sought to penetrate the mysteries of the monument's making, "It's more likely that the stones were first used in a local monument, somewhere near the quarries, that was then dismantled and dragged off to Wiltshire"—making it the very model of a modern movable monument.

Stonehenge is not the only Neolithic monument that turns out to have more get-up-and-go in it than one might expect. As Parker Pearson points out, a sixty-five-ton rock that sits atop La Table des Marchand, in northern France, is part of a hundred-ton menhir, which was toted from several miles away, while another piece of the same stone ended

up in a tomb in Gavrinis, also some distance from the original site. These "secondhand monuments," as archeologists call them, can be found in many places: standing stones sometimes turn out to be scooting stones. Nor did the moving monument pass with the ancient past: London Bridge not long ago raced from London to Arizona, and the beautiful temples of Abu Simbel, in Egypt, were picked up and pulled back to higher ground, out of the way of the approaching Aswan flood.

In a moment, like ours, of so much panicky uncertainty, the news that the most timeless of all big stone things may be as mobile as a trailer home is



comforting. There is more give and flex and second thoughts and penitenti in Neolithic societies than we might have imagined. Neolithic leaders didn't say, "It has ever been here, hallowed by our ancestors!" They said, "Oh, yeah. Let's pack it on up and move it east. It's easier than you might think." Monuments moved and remade have been on the mind of this magazine in the past year, as we left Times Square for the new World Trade Center, built to replace the one destroyed fourteen years ago, on the worst day in the city's modern history. Some trepidation accompanied the transfer, but the new building has become another home. The lesson in recovery of all kinds is that more is usually recoverable than we imagine.

Christmas and New Year's are the ultimate recuperative holiday period, when we celebrate that which is leaving and that which is yet to come. This is true whether the interpretation is historical—in the Northern Hemisphere, the sun fades but always returns—or narrative: the baby is born; he is here to save the world. Winter-solstice rituals predate the Christian holiday, and it was part of the wisdom of the new faith to piggyback, spiritually, on the old,

folding its cosmic message into the universal faith in returning light. Hanukkah and Kwanzaa, in turn, burn their candles, and fold their beliefs into those other festivals. What Fox News persists in calling "the war on Christmas" might better be described as a war *for* the light—an attempt to widen the spectrum of celebration and return it to its original universality. We broaden its meanings by recognizing its metamorphoses.

Needless to say, the archeologist's discovery about the Welsh bluestones was quickly met with skepticism among some geologists, who insist that it is not human intent but mere glacial action that accounts for Stonehenge's relocation. Whichever turns out to be true—a Stonehenge that was sledged from Wales to Wiltshire or one that slid there—the message remains. The Coniferous Tree Exception is not entirely an exception: the temporality of trees is, in the end, one with the temporality of everything else on earth, no matter how massive or stony or impressive. This larger truth about the mutability of our monuments is a somehow reassuring thought with which to greet the coming year.

—Adam Gopnik

## WHAT'S NEW/ DEPT. GOOD GENES



Sir Tom Jones, the singer, who was born in Wales and now lives in Los Angeles, was recently driven through the Bronx, in the company of Mark and Donna Woodward, his son and his daughter-in-law, who are also his managers. The three of them had a half-plan to eat an Italian lunch on Arthur Avenue. Jones (born Woodward) was trying to remember the details of a restaurant, perhaps in that neighborhood, perhaps worth revisiting, to which he had once been taken by Rod Stewart.

"A little slope, the road goes down," Jones said. "I'll know it when I see it."

"Exactly," Woodward said, skeptically.

Jones is seventy-five; his son is sixteen years younger. They have been on the road together for more than forty years. As they looked for lunch, Woodward was gently mocking; Jones had the air of a man trying, with some success, to hold on to his dignity in the face of mild disrespect. He sat very still.

In "Over the Top and Back," a new autobiography, Jones makes a pivot of the moment, in the mid-nineteen-

eighties, when his son became his manager. Woodward was still in his twenties, but he had already been on the road with his father for more than a decade; he went on to guide Jones away from dinner-theatre hip-wagging, and the accompanying ritual of undergarments thrown onstage. Jones's subsequent career—looser-fitting trousers; a hit version of Prince's "Kiss"; the Bowery Ballroom—could be thought of as a son's efforts to minimize the embarrassment of having Tom Jones as a father. Earlier that day, Woodward had referred to Lang Lang, the pianist, and mimed hands bouncing up into the air, while remarking on the effort required to resist the forces that pull a performer toward kitsch and self-parody. "You have to fight it every day," Woodward said. "I do."

They had spent part of the morning at WFUV, on the Fordham campus, where Jones had sung from a new album of rootsy American music. Now Woodward told his father that a studio employee there had pressed him into a discussion of the sound quality on Jones's first album, released in 1965, which included "It's Not Unusual," his first hit. That conversation had turned a little "anoraky," Woodward said, using a British slur against trivia obsessives, but Woodward agreed with the man that "the *openness* of that record is amazing."

His father said nothing. Woodward,

sitting directly behind, said, "On 'Along Came Jones,' the first one?"

"Yep," said Jones.

"You with me on this?" Woodward asked.

"Yes, yes," Jones said. "My first album!"

"O.K., I thought I'd lost you already," Woodward said, laughing.

There was a pause. "Otis Redding told me that every track on there was a single—could have been a single," Jones said.

"That's nice of him," Woodward said. The car stopped in traffic. "You wearing that on 'Charlie Rose'?"

Jones looked himself up and down: a blue jacket over a blue sweater, blue-jeans, blue suede shoes.



Tom Jones



His son went on, “It’s the cameras—if you wear dark . . .”

“It’s not really dark,” Jones said slowly. “It’s *blue*.” The last word sounded very Welsh, and was stressed almost to the point of being sung.

The car stopped on Arthur Avenue. The Rod Stewart restaurant hadn’t revealed itself, and Woodward scoped out another. The family sat, ordered, then discussed the fact that, the night before, at a Barnes & Noble, Mark Woodward had sung with his father, in public, for the first time.

“A bookstore doesn’t count, really,” Donna Woodward said.

“He was there, and he knows the part,” Jones said, in the same spirit.

“And I can sing? Maybe?” Woodward said.

“Yes,” Jones said, fondly.

Jones—who was dropped this summer as a coach on the U.K. edition of “The Voice,” after four seasons, to make room for Boy George—said that he had recently telephoned Little Richard, in a Nashville hospital; Little Richard advised him to establish the Tom Jones Gospel Choir, with his son and his grandson, Alexander, a London accountant. Woodward asked his father if his teen-age taste for blues and gospel—a taste that Elvis Presley had found puzzling, geographically, when the men first met—was primarily connected to the fact that he had a voice suited to singing that music. No, Jones said; he could just as easily have been drawn to musical theatre. “Sisters, sisters,” he sang, as softly as he could manage.

A tall man in late middle age, another diner, came to the table. “My mom and dad were big fans of yours,” he said to Jones. “I saw you play in Dubai. Unbelievable! The women—I’m not kidding—taking off their underwear and throwing them up onstage.”

“Oh, dear,” Woodward said.

“Like, a whole sex-bomb thing,” the man went on, looking at Woodward. “The way he moves. Unbelievable! You’ve got good genes.”

“Thank you,” Woodward said.

The man went back to his table. “Marvellous,” Woodward said quietly. “Everything you want to hear before your avocado.”

—Ian Parker

## HOLDOVER DEPT. STEAMED



This winter’s heat wave has created problems for a lot of ventures: fur-coat sales, ski weekends, pond-hockey games. But it did not affect ticket sales to the Dead Men’s Steam School, a three-hour lecture on such topics as “steam-heating loads” and “boiler ratings,” which will take place at Riccardo’s by the Bridge, in Astoria, on January 6th. Tickets to the event, which cost a hundred and twenty-nine dollars, sold out in November. In case you forgot to book, here are some notes from the previous session:

A catering hall that often hosts weddings, Riccardo’s, on this night, was flanked by white vans, parked bumper to bumper. Inside, beneath chandeliers, burly men in union jackets stood at a buffet, scooping baked ziti onto plates. A screen at the front of the room displayed a skull above a wrench crossed with a rubber mallet.

Dan Holohan, a tall, bespectacled man, took the floor. Through such books as “The Lost Art of Steam Heating” and “We Got Steam Heat! A Homeowner’s Guide to Peaceful Coexistence,” as well as the Web site HeatingHelp.com, Holohan has built a community among those who work on and live with the nineteenth-century heating technology that is still common, if not commonly understood, in New York and in other older cities across the country.

For many of the seventy or so plumbers and maintenance men who were in attendance, still in overalls and work boots, the seminar was tacked on to the end of an already long day. So the energy level was low as Holohan queued up some slides and clicked to an image of the Central Park Arsenal, which dates to 1851, to illustrate his work on the building’s steam system. But the audience perked up when he explained that the arsenal’s radiators now heat the space in seven minutes, rather than two hours. “I got to leave a piece of me in that building,” Holohan said, his face flushed with pride. “And if I could do that why shouldn’t you be able to do that?”

The talk was as much a motivational speech as a technical lecture. It was also a history lesson, connecting today’s humble plumbers to an innovation that changed Americans’ lives and remains one of the more elegant engineering solutions to the problem of winter.

Holohan, who grew up on East Seventy-ninth Street, sees all of New York City through a cloud of steam. For instance, to him the Bryant Park Hotel, a black brick Art Deco tower with gold trim that glows “like the embers of a coal fire,” will always be the headquarters of the American Radiator Company. “Go walk through the lobby,” he urged the men in overalls. “Yes, a building that classy was once a showroom for boilers!”

He admires Fish Bar, in the East Village, not for its seven-dollar shot-and-beer deals but for its burnished, knobby “mattress” radiators. “They’re working great,” Holohan said. “Is anything you installed today going to work so well in a hundred and fifty years?” The Empire State Building is remarkable not just for its height but because all hundred and two floors are heated with only one and a half pounds of steam pressure.

Holohan paused on an image of ice-skaters twirling in Central Park, so old that the Dakota stood alone in the skyline. “What does everyone in this picture have in common?” he asked. “I’ll tell you: every one of them is dead, dead, dead. They don’t know about rock and roll, or a band called the Beatles, or a place called Strawberry Fields. But the heating system in that building behind them is still in place.” The crowd murmured appreciatively.

Steam-heat systems were designed in the eighteen-fifties to work with a steady-burning coal fire and to run hot, as compensation for windows left open in the name of health. (The turn of the twentieth century, when steam really caught on, was the era of overcrowded tenements, fear of “vitiating air,” and the Spanish flu.) Later, windows were sealed for efficiency, but gas and oil boilers could only switch on and off, and—worst of all—the men who had maintained the old systems retired just as a new generation of workers were too occupied with the Vietnam War (or college deferment) to learn the trade.

Holohan, who started as a clerk for

a sales agent of heating parts, gleaned all that he could from old newspapers and books, learning what the old-timers had taken to the grave. Now, after forty-six years in the heating industry, he is retiring from the lecture circuit, and this month's session of Dead Men's Steam School will be his last.

The heating guys filed out, swapping tales of valves, vents, and recalcitrant boilers. "They are a part of something big and essential to life in a world that often gets too cold," Holohan said afterward. "These people need to know how important they are to all of us." In this line of work, winter is always coming.

—Zora O'Neill

## THE PICTURES PUPPET SHOW



Charlie Kaufman and Duke Johnson, who co-directed the new stop-motion-animation film "Anomalisa," were exploring the Whitney Museum in semi-tandem. Kaufman, a short, mordant fifty-seven-year-old who also wrote the script, as well as such films as "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind," hugged the walls, studying the art. Johnson, a rangy, diffident thirty-six-year-old animator, roved to and fro, a large pale moon orbiting a small fiery sun.

"Oh, look," Kaufman said, pointing

to "Puppets," a group of ten ceramic puppets propped in a corner. Johnson narrated: "Charlie stopped and made his way over to the puppets." Kaufman took up the voice-over: "And said, 'Oh, look!,' continuing his obsession with puppets." Unlike their film's flexible silicone dolls, these puppets seemed incapable of drinking, smoking, or having R-rated sex. "They're not functional," Johnson said, losing interest.

In "Anomalisa," a lonesome customer-service expert named Michael Stone spends a night at an oppressively functional Cincinnati hotel before addressing a group of customer-service reps. Everyone he meets has the same voice and the same blandly incomplete face—except an ingenuous rep named Lisa, whom he drunkenly falls for. It doesn't help.

An aluminum Christmas tree by Philippe Parreno prompted discussion of whether "Anomalisa" would prove to be a crowd-pleaser for the holidays. "It might be good for the lonely people," Kaufman said. "I think people who feel things that aren't represented in the media feel comforted by seeing themselves represented, even if it's in their pain. I feel that way." Johnson, however, noted that his animation studio, Starburns Industries, had decided that its next movie would have to be more commercial. The budget had been tight, and the production was grueling, with the team's best animators producing just two seconds of film a day. "'Anomalisa' literally almost destroyed the studio," he said. "Multiple times."

Kaufman protested that "Anomalisa"

not only might still do well but had put Starburns on the map. "We loved this experience," Johnson said, soothingly, but he added that "it would be difficult to say 'O.K.' and to dive into three more years of, like, struggling every day, sometimes crying in the parking lot." How much crying in the parking lot was there? "Charlie? All the time. You couldn't get him out of the parking lot."

The film's version of a Hollywood ending is Michael returning home with a gift for his son: an antique Japanese sex doll. "He's not the greatest dad," Kaufman explained. The son finds semen seeping from the doll, right? "Well, it's an antique."

"I would have loved that as a nine-year-old kid," Johnson said, loyally.

"Minus the semen."

"Well . . ."

The younger man frowned at an incomplete office chair, part of an assemblage called "Work, Made-ready, in Light of Nature," by Simon Starling, and wondered why it qualified as art. Kaufman recalled their visit to a Jeff Koons retrospective in Bilbao, where they saw basketballs in fish tanks. "And the woman was telling us, 'Yeah, it's commenting on popular culture, 'cause sports.' 'Cause sports!'"

They stopped roaming to discuss the nature of work. Kaufman said, "I think about the person in the room-service thing—who may have somebody looking over their shoulder—whose job it is to repeat back the whole description of the food item that you've purchased. And they don't want to do it, you know, and you hate them. But they're stuck in this bullshit world, too." Johnson nodded, and Kaufman continued, "On Virgin Atlantic, coming in, the flight attendant had to show us how to use a seat belt and the air-bag thing, the oxygen mask. And they do it to this rap song, and this plane didn't have the TV; they just had the audio track. And she, poor lady, she didn't have to dance, thank God, but it's, like, 'Use the belt, do the belt, if you don't know how to use the belt, what the hell!' And she's standing there doing it with a smile on her face, and I felt really bad for her."

"She kind of kept making eye contact, like, 'Why are you looking at me?'" Johnson said.

"No one ever looks."



*"Did I remember to close the drawbridge?"*



In his motivational speech, Michael Stone urges Lisa and her colleagues to remember that there's a human being on the other end of the line. "I was very moved by the speech," Johnson confessed. "There's a lot of stuff in there. . . . I don't know what it has to do with customer service."

"He's telling people to see each other," Kaufman allowed, wary of explaining



*Charlie Kaufman and Duke Johnson*

too much. "Which he can't do. He's also saying, 'Everyone's an individual'—and looking out at this crowd of faces that are all exactly the same."

"It's also *how* he says it," Johnson said. "Sometimes saying something in the most direct, obvious way has the most meaning. 'Death comes, and it's as if you'd never existed.'" His gesture comprehended the surrounding monuments.

Kaufman corrected him, gently: "Death comes. That's it. Soon, it's as if we never existed."

—*Tad Friend*

## UP LIFE'S LADDER YOUR MOVE



Fabiano Caruana appeared in a photograph in this magazine in 2001, when he was eight. It was raining, and he was wearing an oversized slicker and standing on a park bench. He held an umbrella with one hand and, with the other, reached across a chessboard to make a move in a game against his teacher, Bruce Pandolfini, who was the

subject of the article that the photograph accompanied. "He was totally unaware of anything but the chess," Pandolfini said recently. (In the movie "Searching for Bobby Fischer," which came out the year after Caruana was born, Pandolfini was portrayed by Ben Kingsley.) Caruana became a grand master in 2007, when he was fourteen, and is currently the third-highest-rated chess player in history, a few points behind Garry Kasparov. In March, he will compete in Moscow for the right to challenge the current world champion, Magnus Carlsen, of Norway, who is two years older.

Caruana lived in Brooklyn between the ages of four and twelve, then moved to Madrid, Budapest, and Lugano. He now lives in Florida. On a recent Monday, he was in Jersey City, at the Liberty Science Center, where he played a chess game against twenty players even younger than he is. "It's not so easy to work as a team," Caruana said afterward. "We played on a giant board, with giant pieces, and they quarrelled over moves." He was asked whether any of his opponents had made him fear for his world ranking. "Maybe in a few years," he said, smiling. That evening, he took on a similar number of opponents—individually, this time, though all at once—in a benefit for Chess Works!, a science-center program for children. The event was held at the W Hoboken, a hotel that has better views of Manhattan than Manhattan does, and the participants ranged in age from six to what appeared to be sixtysomething. Among them were a number of accomplished competitors, including Alice Dong, who is a senior at Princeton High School and one of the top-ranked female players in the United States.

The master of ceremonies was Paul Hoffman, the president of the Liberty Science Center. He was the author of that 2001 article about Pandolfini, and is quite a good chess player himself. He was wearing a dark suit jacket over a T-shirt imprinted with the chess notation for Bobby Fischer's eleventh move in the third game of his epochal world-championship match against Boris Spassky, which took place in Reykjavik, Iceland, in 1972—a move that surprised nearly everyone, including Spassky, and helped reverse the momentum of the match. Hoffman explained the ground rules: talking would be permitted, within reason; Caruana would

have the white pieces, and therefore the first move, on every board; opponents would have to wait until Caruana had arrived at their position to move, so that he could see what they were up to; and as opponents resigned or were checkmated Caruana would autograph their board, which they could keep. "It's not a good sign if I come near you and wave the Sharpie," Hoffman said.

Caruana is slightly built, and he has curly hair and wears fashionable glasses. Even in a suit, he looks younger than twenty-three. He made most of his moves quickly but occasionally had to pause. After he had spent thirty seconds or so in front of the board of Angelica Chin—who is thirteen, and whose eleven-year-old brother, Jonathan, was playing at the board next to hers—Hoffman said, "Nice. You made him think." Steve Fulop, the mayor of Jersey City, lasted longer than most, and when he was eliminated Hoffman consoled him. "All right, Steve," he said. "You're a grand master at running a city."

After about an hour, there were more students than adults left; then the balance shifted; then it shifted again. Among the very last players to be eliminated—and the only one to survive beyond his bedtime—was Abhimanyu Mishra, six years old, who had been taking swigs from a Lightning McQueen water bottle. Like most of the participants, he used chess notation to record the moves in his game, but, unlike most of them, he needed several sheets of paper: he's still working on his letters and numerals. The last surviving adult was Donari Braxton, a thirty-three-year-old filmmaker. The last two players over all were Jonathan Chin and Alice Dong, who fell almost simultaneously.

Two of Pandolfini's current students were among the competitors: Lucas Foerster-Yialamas, eight, and TJ Fini, seven. They lasted well into the evening's endgame, and after Caruana had signed their boards they moved to the other side of the room and offered advice to Michael J. DeMarco, the president of Mack-Cali Realty Corporation, who had arrived late and had to make several moves quickly to get caught up. "When you get to be seventeen," he told them shortly before he was defeated, "come see me and I'll give you internships."

—*David Owen*

ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

## READY FOR PRIME TIME

*After twenty-five years as a road comic, Leslie Jones becomes a star.*

BY ANDREW MARANTZ

On TV talk shows, the host introduces a guest, then music plays while the guest emerges from backstage. On podcasts, the etiquette is still being worked out. The host often launches into an introduction while the guest sits quietly in the same sound booth. A couple of years ago, the co-hosts of a podcast called “Alias Smith and LeRoi” began this way, speak-

hate that shit.” End of introduction.

Comedians are combatants: they “kill,” they “bomb,” they “destroy.” Such bluster can mask insecurity, and Jones had good reason to feel defensive. She was forty-six, and had been a standup comedian for more than a quarter century; her peers respected her, but that respect rarely translated into high-paying gigs. “I re-

Chappelle, acted in movies alongside Ice Cube and Martin Lawrence, recorded a standup special for Showtime, and made several appearances on HBO’s “Def Comedy Jam” and BET’s “ComicView,” she worried that the gatekeepers of mainstream comedy—bookers for the “Tonight Show,” casting directors of big-budget films—had never heard her name. “Every black comedian in the country knew what I could do,” she said. “But that doesn’t mean everyone else is paying attention.” Chris Rock, who met Jones when they were both road comics in the late eighties, told me, “Black women have the hardest gig in show business. You hear Jennifer Lawrence complaining about getting paid less because she’s a woman—if she was black, she’d *really*



*Jones, who will star in a reboot of “Ghostbusters,” says, “People get hung up on writing smart shit. To me, it’s more about performance.”*

ing about their guest, the comedian Leslie Jones, as if she were not there.

“This is gonna be kind of a hot one,” Ali LeRoi said.

“I’ve been waiting to sit her ass down for a minute,” Owen Smith said. “One of the funniest women in the game.”

“Funniest *comedian* in the game,” Jones interrupted. “Not just woman. I

member some nights where I was, like, ‘All right, this comedy shit just ain’t working out,’” she told me recently. “And not just when I was twenty-five. Like, when I was *forty-five*.” She was a woman in a field dominated by men, and an African-American in an industry that remained disturbingly segregated. Although she had opened for Katt Williams and Dave

have something to complain about.”

Jones spent much of her career performing in what she calls “shitty chitlin-circuit-ass rooms, where you’re just hoping the promoter pays you.” She told me that, around 2010, “I stopped only doing black clubs. I stopped doing what I call ‘nigger nights’—the Chocolate Sundays, the Mo’ Better Mondays. I



knew how to relate to that audience, and I was winning where I was, but I wasn't moving forward." She lived in Los Angeles at the time, and she began asking for spots at the Comedy Store, where David Letterman and Robin Williams got their starts. A comedian named Erik Marino, who befriended her there, said, "She felt very strongly that she was being pigeonholed as a black comic—a BET comic."

For a while, Jones performed at the Store at odd hours. Then, she said, "I went to the booker and I threw the race card at him. 'Why you won't let me go up at ten on a Friday?' 'Cause I'm black?'" The booker gave her a prime-time slot. "She destroyed, obviously," Marino said. "Bookers are the ones who care about black rooms versus white rooms. To us comedians, it's, like, if you know what you're doing and you can connect with an audience, they're gonna laugh."

Rock saw Jones perform at the Store in 2012. After her set, he told her, "You were always funny, but you're at a new level now."

"You're right," she responded. "But I'm not gonna really make it unless someone like you puts me on." Rock took out his iPhone and added her name to a list labelled "Funny people."

Jones has big eyes and a round, rubbery face. She is six feet tall, and often exaggerates her stature by wearing high heels and gelling her hair upward, fright-wig style. "I know I'm fly—don't get me wrong," she told me. "But I don't look, like, standard Hollywood. As a comedian, it's something you learn to use."

Some paunchy male comics, such as Louis C.K. and Jim Gaffigan, occasionally refer to their looks; others seem oblivious of their appearance. Women don't have this luxury. Jones often begins her standup sets by "taking away their bullets"—neutralizing anything that might distract an audience, so that "they can stop looking at my outfit, stop worrying about whether I think I'm sexy, and just listen." Her Showtime special, "Problem Child," which aired in 2010, began that way:

I know y'all already noticed that I'm a big bitch. . . . When I walk in a Payless, it gets quiet than a motherfucker. . . . I swear, men, if you can get past my big-ass feet and how

tall I am, I'm a great fucking catch. . . . I'm fine. I can fuck. I can fight. Oh, I ain't no damsel in distress, motherfucker. You can go get the car, baby, while I handle these three thug motherfuckers.

The final line devolves into shadowboxing—Jones bobbing and weaving like a mean-mugging Buster Keaton.

One bullet that this opening takes away is speculation about Jones's sexuality. She has never been married and has no children; much of her act these days is about trying to find a man. "I speak for the lonely bitches," she said. She was born in Memphis and raised in a church-going family. At one point, she told me, "It's too bad I'm not gay, 'cause I'd get the flyest bitches."

The opening of her special also allows her to pivot quickly to pantomime, one of her greatest comedic skills. Roger Ailes, the chairman of Fox News, likes to say that an anchor should be interesting even with the TV on mute. Jones has similar thoughts about comedy. "People get hung up on writing smart shit," she said. "To me, it's more about performance. Lucille Ball and Moms Mabley, they had *face*. Before they even said a word, they made you crack up." Paul Feig, the director of "Bridesmaids" and other comedies, compared Jones to Will Ferrell and Chris Farley: "They all have the ability to take a larger-than-life persona and present it in a real, accessible way."

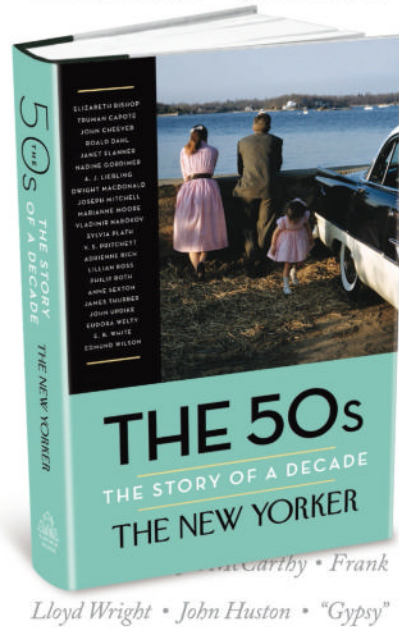
Some self-consciously hip venues foster an arch, hypervocal style of standup that is sometimes called alt comedy. A Jones show is more like a semi-improvised concert. "She has a presence, when you see her live, that is extremely rare," the comedian Marc Maron said. "And, honestly, it has very little to do with what she's saying. The first time I saw her, I was blown away, and yet I couldn't tell you a single one of her jokes."

Michael Che, a writer and a performer on "Saturday Night Live" who also does standup, told me, "A black audience—we expect our performers to actually *perform*. And Leslie comes out of that tradition." Bernie Mac's first appearance on "Def Comedy Jam," in 1992, became canonical not because of his punch lines but because of a defiant refrain that he directed at the audience: "I ain't scared of you motherfuckers." Che continued, "It's not that Leslie yells and screams and jumps around. It's that she's brutally honest, and

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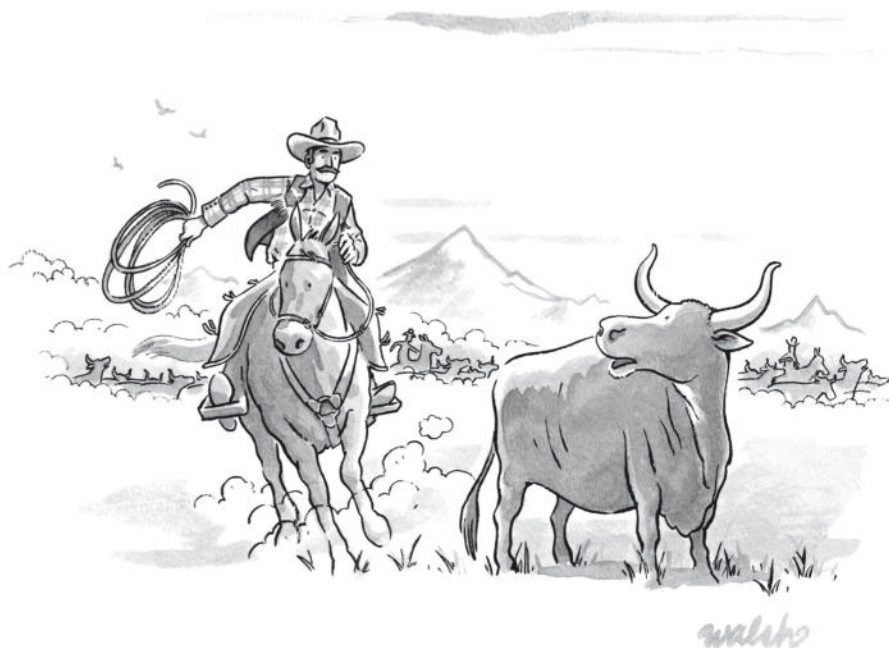
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*"I'm coming—I just needed some 'me' time."*

she knows how to sell material more convincingly than anyone I can think of. As soon as she walks onstage, you know she's the boss."

Near the end of her Showtime special, Jones takes a deep breath and wipes her face with a small towel printed with the word "Leslie." "This is my favorite part of the show," she says. Then she wades into the audience with a cordless microphone. She crouches over a black woman in the front row who is wearing a shiny headband. "Is that a goddam antenna?" Jones says. "I bet you get all the DirecTV channels." By this point, Jones is practically lying on top of the woman, whispering directly into her ear (and into the microphone). Nearby, audience members laugh so hard that they fall out of their seats. Comedians have always used personalized insults to establish dominance over a crowd; Jones literally gets in her audience's face.

A few rows back, she clammers over several audience members to get to a light-skinned black woman wearing blue contact lenses. "Yeah, I saw your pretty ass, you fuckin' pretty bitch," she says. She asks the woman many variations of the same question: "Are you sucking dick?" The woman, unfazed, shakes her head no. "Do you even like dick?" Jones asks. Again, the woman shakes her head. "Wow,"

Jones says, wide-eyed. First, she leans toward the woman. Then she backs away. "Don't you bitches be trying to flirt with me," she says. Under her breath, almost to herself, she adds, "I'm not going to Hell, Lord, like that."

Jones surveys her audience before picking targets. She told me, "I can look into a person's eyes for one second and go, 'Don't fuck with him—that's somebody who won't get over what you're about to say. Talk about that other guy instead.'" When I saw her perform at Carolines on Broadway, a comedy club near Times Square, she got only ninety seconds into her set before turning to a white man with a vintage vest and sculpted facial hair. "That goatee is *bullshit*," she said. "And your girl is pissed that you wore that shit." Pause. "Her family fuckin' hates you. It's cool to be in New York with your goatee and your vest. In South Dakota, that's some *bullshit*!" Mocking a goatee is not trenchant observational humor, but Jones's swagger, and the specificity of her language, made the bit feel charged, like a knife trick performed at close range.

She ended the set by singling out a young white woman in the audience and contriving a reason to bury her face in the woman's hair—less a joke than a performance of trampled social mores. As the

houselights came up, the woman said, with a dazed smile, "Her sweat is all over me! What just happened?"

On the "Alias Smith and LeRoi" podcast, which was recorded in late 2013, Jones returned often to the topic of sexism. "You guys gotta support us," she said. "You have somebody like the dude from 'S.N.L.' say that black women are not funny? People listen to that shit."

LeRoi corrected her: "He didn't say 'funny.' He said 'ready.'"

They were referring to a recent *TV Guide* article noting that "S.N.L." had just hired six new cast members, five of them white men. The reporter asked Kenan Thompson, one of two black males on the show, why there hadn't been a black female cast member since 2007, when Maya Rudolph left. "In auditions, they just never find ones that are ready," he said.

Soon after the article was published, Thompson was denounced online. (In a reaction video on YouTube, a woman named Dawn Melissa said, "Seriously, get it together. Because there's no joke funnier than the one your mom made when she had you.") Around this time, Jones was at an L.A. comedy club called Inside Jokes, waiting to go onstage, when someone told her about Thompson's comment. "He should come battle me," Jones said. "Give me ten minutes and I'll ruin his life." That night, she had a strong set. After her closing joke, she said, "And they say we ain't funny, huh?," dropped the mike, and walked off to a standing ovation.

On the podcast, Jones said of Thompson's remark, "They're not 'ready'? That's bullshit. 'Cause I know I'm ready."

LeRoi, who has worked as a producer on several comedy shows, said, "'Ready' is not just the can-you-be-on-camera part. When you say 'ready,' it's, like, 'Yeah, bitch, you might have four impersonations, but can you write a fucking sketch? Yes—can you get ten sketches turned down and write an eleventh sketch?'"

Jones tried to speak.

"No, no, no—keep listening," LeRoi said.

She exhaled audibly, but let him finish mansplaining. "I have never said I would want to be on 'Saturday Night Live,'" she responded. "I don't do impressions. I don't know if I could write sketch. So, no, I would never put myself into that circle. Even if they asked me to come and audition, I'd really be, like, 'Eh, I don't



know if I can do that.' But I do know women who can." Pounding a hand on the table, she added, "There's motherfuckin' three bitches I can call *right now*, goddammit, that will fill that spot. . . . Just because you don't know them, that don't mean that they don't fucking exist. That's like saying Italy does not exist. Motherfucker, yes, it does. I've been there."

That November, before the podcast with Jones came out, Kerry Washington hosted "Saturday Night Live." During the opening sketch, an announcer apologized for "the number of black women" Washington was being asked to play, "both because Ms. Washington is an actress of considerable range and talent and also because 'S.N.L.' does not currently have a black woman in the cast." It got laughs, but it was a comedic response to a serious problem.

Meanwhile, the show was secretly planning auditions for black women. The producers looked at more than a hundred women, most of them associated with the troika of traditional "S.N.L." feeder troupes: Second City, in Chicago; the Groundlings, in L.A.; and Upright Citizens Brigade, in New York. Jones was not among them.

A dozen women were selected for callback auditions, which took place in December, on the "S.N.L." stage, at 30 Rockefeller Center. A few days before the callbacks, Chris Rock had dinner with Lorne Michaels, the creator and executive producer of "S.N.L." "You should look at Leslie Jones," Rock said. "She's the funniest woman I know." Michaels agreed to give her a chance.

An "S.N.L." audition is notoriously tough: the studio is dark and cavernous, and the producers sit silently near the back. Jones recalled, "I got onstage, took the mike out of the stand, and went, 'Nope. Y'all are gonna have to move up to where I can see you.' And Lorne got his ass up and moved."

She did not attempt impersonations or funny voices; she did her act. She opened with an autobiographical anecdote about being a gangly ten-year-old who longed to be a petite gymnast. "I wrote it in 1987," she told me. "It's the closest I've come to a perfect joke, but it took years before I was talented enough to perform it." The joke is an allegory about defying parental and societal expectations, and it includes

two cartwheels. I saw her perform it at Carolines three nights in a row, and it earned an applause break every time.

After the "S.N.L." audition, Jones flew back to L.A. and waited. A week later, she heard the news: the job had gone to Sasheer Zamata, a twenty-seven-year-old improviser and sketch performer at U.C.B., who is Disney-princess pretty. Jones said, "I understood why they gave it to her—she'd been doing sketch for a long time, she's a natural fit—but at the same time I was fucking pissed." The next day, she got a call from Michaels, who asked if she would take a job as a writer. "I went, 'You know I have no fucking idea how to do that, right?'" Still, she accepted the offer and moved to Harlem.

"I'd spent a while in the real world," she told me. "I'd seen some shit." Most of the other "S.N.L." writers had graduated from elite colleges within the past decade. "But one thing I learned—they're not racist. They're just white. They don't know certain things." During her first week on staff, Drake was the host. Some of the writers wanted to do a sketch about "The Glass Menagerie." Jones told me, "Now, I know what it is. I've been to college. But I went, 'People in Compton smoking a joint, they're changing the channel when this comes on. It doesn't matter if Drake is in the sketch. They don't care what a fucking menagerie is. They think it's 'The Glass Ménage à Trois.''" The sketch bombed at the dress rehearsal and was cut. "Leslie is a pretty good litmus test for what America will think is funny," Zamata told me.

When Jones met Kenan Thompson, she confronted him about his *TV Guide* interview. "I came at him, like, 'I heard what you said, motherfucker.' He said, 'Come in, close the door, let's talk.'" Thompson told me, "What I said was that the show hadn't found the right people. That was true. And at the end of the day Leslie and Sasheer both got jobs, so I'm happy." These days, Jones said, "Kenan is possibly my best friend on the show."

"S.N.L." often hires good-looking young comics—Chevy Chase, Adam Sandler, Jason Sudeikis—who go on to become leading men in Hollywood. In the eighties, Al Franken, then a producer on the show, recommended a pudgy nebbish named Jon Lovitz. Franken told Michaels, "He's everything we're not looking for in one person." Lovitz was hired, and he be-

came a key cast member for five seasons.

"I tell Leslie all the time, 'You're everything we weren't looking for,'" Michaels said. "When someone's funny, they're funny. She was fully formed as a standup. I knew she'd have to learn the sketch thing, the technique part, but with some people you go, 'Let's just get them in the building.'" After a few months, Jones was added to the cast.

Rock said, "I mentioned her to several managers and agents over the years. Everybody passed. Lorne, because he's the best at what he does, is the one who saw it. I don't think he'd hired a cast member her age in a long time." In fact, Jones was the oldest cast member "S.N.L." had ever hired.

Despite the name, about a quarter of "Saturday Night Live" is pre-taped, usually on the Thursday or Friday before the broadcast. In April, Jones spent a misty Thursday in Bayside, Queens, shooting a "Game of Thrones"-meets-"Boyz n the Hood" sketch that required her to ride a horse for the first time. "I definitely spent the morning in bed with a sore ass," she told me. "I hope people get it. Do kids even know who John Singleton is anymore?"

Late the following night, at 30 Rock, a camera crew filmed a parody movie trailer—a venerable "S.N.L." form that allows for a parade of celebrity impressions. Jones was in costume as Missy Elliott, whose song "Work It" contains a line of rhythmic nonsense: "Ra-ta-ta-ta ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta." Because the parody trailer was about space aliens, Jones was asked to replace the last "ta" with "space." One of the sketch's writers, Alison Rich, a recent Harvard graduate with blunt-cut bangs, did her best to sell the joke, but Jones gave her a befuddled look. (Later, Colin Jost, an "S.N.L." writer and performer, told me, "When Leslie thinks something is funny, she's extremely generous. When she doesn't think something is funny, you usually know it.")

Jones performed a few takes. She made the line sound better than it was, infusing the word "space" with hip-hop bravado, but she used the wrong number of syllables. Rich stopped her and said, "I think, actually—are there maybe not enough 'ta's?'"

Jones said nothing.

Rich, smiling solicitously, played the

song on her phone. “You see how many ‘ta’s there are?” she said.

“You gon’ kill me on the ‘ta’s, bitch?” Jones said, enunciating each word for effect. It could have been the punch line in a standup bit, except that no one seemed to know if she was joking. “Why am I even listening to a white girl on this?” she said.

Rich’s smile dimmed, and she looked around anxiously. The only person to meet her eye was Natasha Rothwell, a black writer, who gave Rich a subtle, reassuring nod. The shooting continued. In the final cut of the sketch, Jones delivered a different lyric from the same song.

“I’ve perfected the art of busting on people,” Jones told me later. “That’s how comedians show each other love.” “Top Five,” a 2014 comedy written and directed by Chris Rock, features a long, largely ad-libbed scene in which an ensemble of comedians—including Rock, Jones, and Tracy Morgan—trade admiration-tinged insults. “That was the best scene in the movie, and Leslie was the best part of it,” Rock said. “Whenever I showed the movie to other directors—Ben Stiller, P. T. Anderson, Judd Apatow—their first reaction was always pointing at Leslie and going, ‘Who is *that*?’” Apatow was so impressed that he and Amy Schumer created a part for Jones in “Trainwreck.” When Schumer’s character finds herself on a stopped subway train, she turns to Jones for help. “Do I look like I work for M.T.A.?” Jones says, her eyes lighting up with contempt. “What, I got MetroCards in my fucking purse now?”

Jones’s ability to wring laughs from almost nothing—a raised eyebrow, a drawn-out pause—allows her to transmute a screenwriter’s B-minus joke into an A. But, in her standup, this gift has an unfortunate consequence: she is so reliably successful with sets that consist of crowd work and time-tested jokes that she feels little pressure to write new material, like a chef who can make a gourmet meal out of whatever happens to be in the fridge. “As Leslie gets really famous, it’ll be harder for her to repeat stuff,” Rock said. “Until then, you do what works.”

One night, I had dinner with Jones at Buddakan, an Asian-fusion restaurant in Chelsea that looks like it could serve as a set for “The King and I.” “The dandan noodles here are fucking insane,” she

said. After dinner, dessert, and a couple of rounds of Patrón, we took a cab to the Comedy Cellar, in Greenwich Village. The booker, Estee Adoram, greeted Jones with a hug and implored her to perform, but she preferred to socialize. She walked past the comedian Judah Friedlander—he grabbed her arm and said, “Keep kicking ass”—and took a seat next to Larry Wilmore. At one point, the reactionary pundit Ann Coulter stopped by their table. Wilmore was courteous, but Jones leaned across the table and stage-whispered, “What the fuck is this frightening bitch doing here?” Coulter’s face froze in a rictus, and she soon backed away from the table.

We then took a taxi to the Comic Strip, on the Upper East Side, where a friend of Jones’s was hosting a standup show. On the way, she predicted, “Either he’s gonna make me perform or he’s gonna make me smoke weed with him.” The friend, standing outside the club between sets, saw Jones getting out of the cab and immediately started ribbing her: “I’ve been texting you. You too famous for me now?” They slipped away and returned a few minutes later, looking more relaxed. In the lobby, someone gestured at a TV mounted near the ceiling. It was a rerun of “S.N.L.” Jones was performing on the show’s fake-news segment, “Weekend Update.” Her mouth was an emotional roulette wheel: withering glower, self-assured sneer, toothy smile. The TV was inaudible, and a bartender scrambled for a remote, but people in the lobby were already laughing.

One Tuesday night in May, Jones sat in her “S.N.L.” office, talking on the phone with her accountant. On Tuesday nights, the host walks from office to office, listening as writers and cast members propose ideas for sketches; the most promising proposals become scripts, which are performed at a table read the next day. That week’s host, Louis C.K., could be heard across the hall, laughing generously behind a closed door.

Jones hung up. “I have a couple of ideas I might try on Louis,” she said. “There’s one called ‘Jungle Fever,’ where he’s never had sex with a black girl and she’s never had sex with a white guy, and they’re asking each other questions. But Kenan said, ‘You gotta stop making everything about race, because sometimes

it’s scary to people.’ So I’m figuring out how to rewrite it.”

Jay Pharoah, who became a cast member in 2010, at the age of twenty-three, stopped by Jones’s office. “Remember the guy who tries to steal intangible stuff?” he said, referring to an old sketch idea.

“Yo, let me get that confidence off you,” Jones said.

“Let me get your appetite, son. I like the way you be eating things,” Pharoah said.

“That’s funny, Jay,” Jones said. “You should write that, and put me in it.”

Pharoah continued down the hall. “He’s been messing around with that all year, but he never sits down and writes it,” Jones said. “I love Jay to death, but he’s like a toddler, man.”

Later that night, Pharoah and a writer, Mikey Day, put together a draft of the sketch. It got laughs at the table read, and the producers decided to pre-tape it. So on Friday morning C.K., Pharoah, Jones, and four other cast members gathered at a warehouse in an industrial part of Brooklyn. The sketch was set at a rooftop cook-out, and the warehouse’s roof was crammed with camera equipment and about fifty extras. Jones, wearing a red wig and hoop earrings, stood behind a grill, flipping burgers. Every few takes, a P.A. collected them and fed them to the crew.

Pharoah wore a red Yankees cap and a cornrow wig. “Yo, lemme get that confident smile off you,” he said. The other actors, playing his neighbors, rolled their eyes.

While the crew reset the cameras, Jones went inside to rest. She was in a bad mood. “I know this is a good job, but, honestly, it’s brutal sometimes,” she said. She had woken up before five, to get picked up in Harlem and driven to Brooklyn. “I sometimes wonder what this would have been like if I was in my twenties,” she said. “Right now, I can’t wait for Sunday, so I can fall the fuck asleep.”

Zamata and Bobby Moynihan, another cast member, napped on leather couches nearby; C.K. and Thompson groggily refilled their coffee cups. Only Pharoah was indefatigable. He stayed on the roof, keeping the extras entertained. (To a white couple: “Let me get that comfort with being two of the only Caucasians here off you.”)

The cast ran through the sketch a few more times. Between takes, C.K. pulled Pharoah and Thompson aside and said,



"My voice in this—I'm not sounding, like, too black, am I?"

"You're good," Thompson said.

"Because we're also gonna do the Sprint-store thing," C.K. said. In that sketch, he played a cell-phone salesman who switched into exaggerated street slang whenever his boss, played by Jones, was in the room. "I'm just imagining articles coming out on Sunday morning about me doing racist voices."

"Just be funny, man," Thompson said. "Don't worry about the blog stuff." This led to a riff about how various iconic comedians would have responded to on-line scrutiny. (Pharoah, doing a Richard Pryor impression: "The thing that be botherin' me about Bossip is . . .") When standups perform, their jokes include exposition, to keep the audience from getting lost; but comedians among their own kind are like chess players executing a quick flurry of moves.

Jones, flipping burgers, continued to sulk. Between takes, Pharoah turned to her and said, "Les, you look like you're about to slice somebody's head off with that spatula."

"I am," she said.

"Yo, let me get that ability to stay angry in front of all these people that's paying you," Pharoah said.

C.K. joined in: "Let me get that unalterable edge of anger impervious to success off you."

Pharoah and C.K. were, in their way, expressing concern, and Jones seemed appreciative. Nevertheless, she played up her frustration for laughs. "I've been standing here all day inhaling smoke from this stank-ass grill," she said. Pharoah and C.K. smiled, giving her space to keep going. "I hate the sun on my face," she continued. "I hate this horrible-ass neighborhood." She peered out over the rooftop, selecting objects for ridicule. "I hate these dingy-ass auto shops. I hate this nasty graffiti everywhere. Can't even get it together to have some nice graffiti."

Gradually, she lightened up. In the next take, C.K. slipped into a stilted locution. Jones grinned and said, "Did someone tell you this was Shakespeare?"

Like many standups, Jones generates most of her material in performance, discovering funny phrases and gestures onstage. When she became a writer for "S.N.L.," she barely knew how to use a

word-processing program. "I'm old school," she said. "I wouldn't even buy a cell phone until a few years ago." Zamata told me, "I remember sitting in Leslie's office and watching her go, 'How do I get the ideas out of my head and onto the page?'"

"My sense was that, before she came here, she wasn't a regular viewer," Lorne Michaels said. Jones confirmed this. "I watched 'S.N.L.' the way most black people watched it: I watched Eddie. Then I stopped."

During her first few months as a writer, Jones submitted a variety of sketches, most of them adapted from her act, including one in which Lena Dunham played Jesus' personal assistant, and one about the types of women in a nightclub posse (the designated driver, the alcoholic, the slut). None made it to air. "As a comedian, it's, like, 'I'm bombing. What am I doing wrong?'" she said. "At least they still paid me."

It was her first regular paycheck. When Jones was born, her father, an electrical engineer, worked as a studio technician at WDIA, in Memphis, which is often called "the nation's first all-black radio station." In 1979, Stevie Wonder bought KJLH, an R.&B. station with offices in Compton, and hired Jones's father. The

family moved to Lynwood, which borders Compton to the north.

After a while, Jones's father left KJLH and the family moved to a rougher part of Lynwood. "I remember my brother and them always having to run home from school, so the gangsters wouldn't beat them up," Jones said. "It was easier for me. People would see me walking and be, like, 'You're going straight home, right?' I was a basketball player, and they knew I was serious about success, not getting pregnant. I didn't know what I was gonna be yet, but I knew I was gonna get the fuck out of there." Crack came to Lynwood in the eighties. "That fucked everybody up. My brother started selling, and you'd see the most unexpected people coming to the window. The dude I used to have a crush on—he's a crack-head now? My high-school teacher—it got her, too?"

She went to Chapman University, a Christian college in Orange County, on a basketball scholarship. College, she said, was her "hippie phase": "no shoes, no underwear, sex with strange people—good times." Before her sophomore year, her basketball coach got a job at Colorado State, and Jones transferred there. "They weren't really my



people in Colorado,” she said. “A lot of white girls with ponytails.” A friend signed her up for a comedy competition, and Jones won without having prepared an act. “I went, ‘Fuck college, fuck basketball, I’m funny,’ and I dropped out. The next week, I was back in California.” She was nineteen.

A month later, she was on a bill with Jamie Foxx, who was then a touring comic. “I was doing jokes about white churches versus black churches, and imitating my uncle’s stutter. I was terrible.” The audience booed her off the stage. Then Foxx performed. “It was, like, a religious feeling, watching him,” Jones said. “I had never seen a real comedian before, at least not in person.”

After the show, Foxx took her to a Fatburger. “You could be good, but you don’t have shit to talk about yet,” he told her. “You need to get your heart broken, have some bad jobs—live life for a while.”

Jones took this advice so seriously that she did not perform for six years. She worked as a cook, a cashier, and a waitress; she sold perfume at a mall; she became a justice of the peace and officiated at weddings. When she started performing again, in the mid-nineties, she kept working part time; a spot on BET’s “ComicView” paid only a hundred and fifty dollars. “I was the funniest waitress Roscoe’s Chicken and Waffles ever had,” she said. “Customers would be, like, ‘Didn’t I just see you on BET?’ I’d be, like, ‘Yep. Breast and a wing or leg and a thigh?’” She and her long-term boyfriend broke up, which renewed her drive to make money, and also inspired jokes about the single woman’s plight. (“I be walking up to men in the club, like, ‘Can you lend me some dick till I get on my feet?’”) By her estimation, it took ten years before she found her comedic voice.

One night, after a bad date, she came home alone, smoked a joint, and turned on the TV. She told me, “A slave movie was on and, out of bitterness, this ridiculous idea popped into my head: during slave times, I never would have been single.” She wrote a joke based on the premise, but felt it was too personal to perform. “It wasn’t a commentary on slavery,” she said. “It was about my pain—about how hard it is, as a black woman, to get

black dudes to date you. The first time I told it—to a mostly black audience in L.A.—“it massacred to the point where I went, ‘There’s something real here.’” She told it several more times, in clubs and on TV.

For her first appearance on “S.N.L.,” she repeated the joke, almost unchanged, from behind the “Weekend Update” desk. “I do not want to be a slave,” she said. “Hell, I don’t like working for you white people right now, and y’all *pay* me. I’m just saying . . . I would be the No. 1 Slave Draft Pick. All of the plantations would want me. I’d be on television, like LeBron, announcing which plantation I was gonna go to. I would be, like, ‘I would like to take my talents to South Carolina.’” The joke sparked outrage online—Jamilah Lemieux, in *Ebony*, called it “a grossly offensive skit about slave rape”—but it also demonstrated Jones’s obvious talent as a performer. “Live from New York!,” a recent documentary about “S.N.L.,” devoted several minutes to the joke, the backlash, and the backlash to the backlash, including a comment from Jones: “Not only did I take something of pain and make it funny, motherfucker—it was brilliant.”



The next time Jones appeared on “Weekend Update,” four months later, the director Paul Feig was watching at home. “I don’t normally like when actors are big and loud,” he said. “But she was able to do it with this grounded, relatable sort of energy. Before her segment was over, I said to my wife, ‘I think she’s one of our ghostbusters.’”

Feig and I were speaking in a hangarlike space in Norwood, Massachusetts, outside Boston. It was September—the sixty-ninth day of a seventy-two-day shoot. Feig’s reboot of “Ghostbusters,” to be released next summer, will star Melissa McCarthy, Kristen Wiig, Kate McKinnon, and Jones. In it—unlike in “Trainwreck”—Jones will play an M.T.A. employee. The movie was still officially untitled, but on-set swag was labelled “Ghostbusters 2016.”

Most of the on-location filming took place on the streets of Boston, camouflaged as New York. Interior shots were captured in the Norwood building, a former Reebok warehouse, which

contained green screens and a handful of lifelike sets: a Chinese restaurant’s colorful façade, a two-story Art Deco hotel lobby. Jones’s character, Patty Tolan, is a station agent turned—spoiler alert—ghostbuster.

The original movie and its sequel featured four ghostbusters, but the substantive roles went to the three white stars—Dan Aykroyd, Harold Ramis, and Bill Murray. Ernie Hudson, an African-American graduate of the Yale School of Drama, played Winston Zeddemore, the Zeppo of the bunch. Hudson recently wrote in *Entertainment Weekly* that, when he first read the script, “It was a bigger part, and Winston was there all the way through the movie.” In the final script, the part had eroded.

Feig said that, compared with Winston, “Patty’s a bigger part. I definitely wanted four equal team members.” Jones told me, “He made it completely equal. It was like a superhero team, where each one has her own skill but can’t use it without the others.”

Before casting Jones, Feig, who wears bespoke suits and carries a walking stick, invited her for a drink at the St. Regis Hotel, in New York. “It was pleasant at first, but sort of formal,” he said. “Then I started asking her about standup. All of a sudden, her personality came through.” Feig did standup in the eighties, and it did not surprise him that Jones hadn’t “crossed over” earlier: “You get used to seeing that, unfortunately.” Before meeting Feig, Jones had appeared in about a dozen movies, often as an unnamed character (Night Nurse; Boss Lady). Many went straight to video. Her first starring role will be in “Ghostbusters 2016,” whose budget is rumored to exceed a hundred and fifty million dollars.

I hadn’t seen Jones in several weeks, and when I found her in her trailer she greeted me with “You can tell I lost weight, right?” She cheerfully humble-bragged about stunts she had been asked to do: “These motherfuckers don’t understand I’m a comedian. They’ve got me doing all this Van Damme shit.” The previous day, she told me, she had used one of her “Ghostbusters” checks to pay off the last of her credit-card loans. For the first time in her adult life, she was debt-free.

She texted several times a minute with McKinnon, who had returned to New York the previous night. They knew



## POEM OF REGRET FOR AN OLD FRIEND

What you did wasn't so bad.  
You stood in a small room, waiting for the sun.  
At least you told yourself that.  
I know it was small,  
but there was something, a kind of pulped lemon,  
at the low edge of the sky.

No, you're right, it was terrible.  
Terrible to live without love  
in small rooms with vinyl blinds  
listening to music secretly,  
the secret music of one's head  
which can't be shared.

A dream is the only way to breathe.  
But you must  
find a more useful way to live.  
I suppose you're right  
this was a failure: to stand there  
so still, waiting for—what?

When I think about this life,  
the life you led, I think of England,  
of secret gardens that never open,  
and novels sliding off the bed  
at night where the small handkerchief  
of darkness settles over  
one's face.

—*Meghan O'Rourke*

each other from "S.N.L.," where McKinnon is also a cast member, but their friendship had deepened on the set. "She had me walking everywhere—all around Boston, looking at old-fashioned doors and shit," Jones said. "I hated it at first, but then I really got into it." Though McKinnon had a girlfriend, she and Jones referred to each other as "my movie wife," "my movie husband," or simply "my bitch." "I learned a lot from watching her timing," Jones said. "She is a beast."

When her makeup and hair were in place, Jones walked through the warehouse to a replica of a New York subway station, with working turnstiles and dirt-streaked tile walls. She entered a fake ticket booth and inspected the props on the desk, which included a paperback about the Constitutional Convention. The cover depicted several Founding Fathers in tricorns. "Paul, does this look like some shit I would read?" she said.

"Do you see any black people on this cover, Paul?"

Feig chuckled, sat behind a monitor, and called, "Action!" Neil Casey, a U.C.B. alumnus who plays the movie's villain, walked up to the booth.

"Can I help you?" Jones said, impatiently.

"Leslie, keep it positive at first," Feig said. "That way, he gets crazier and crazier, and you have somewhere to go."

"Cool," Jones said. In the next take, she started out with a dimpled smile, which melted away as Casey grew more menacing.

"Cut," Feig said. "Much better."

Jones, holding up the book, said, "Actually, I did find a black dude in here."

They walked across the warehouse to shoot another scene, set at a concert. In a gag reminiscent of one in "School of Rock," Jones's character had attempted to stage-dive, but the crowd had failed to catch her. In this shot, fans helped

her to her feet. The line in the script was "I can't believe you let me fall!"

"Play around," Feig said. "We'll do a few."

"What is wrong with y'all? Pick my ass up!"

"Good. Again."

"I don't know if that was a race thing or a lady thing, but I'm mad as hell."

"Nice. Give me one last one—dealer's choice."

"Oh, you ain't gonna be able to use my dealer's choice," Jones said.

"Try me," Feig said.

Action. "I can't believe you let a bitch fall like that!" she said to one of the men. "I was gonna go out with you, too."

Feig laughed. When Jones was done with all her scenes, he led her toward the middle of the warehouse, where a group formed a circle around her.

"Folks, this is a Boston wrap on the lovely Ms. Leslie Jones," he said. Everyone clapped. Someone handed her flowers. Wiig stepped into the circle, hugged Jones, and said, "You did it, girl!" while doing a self-conscious wiggle dance. It all seemed a bit forced, but as Jones walked away from the set I noticed that she was crying.

In her trailer, she sat quietly for a moment, waiting for a hairdresser to remove her wig. "I think I'm scared to leave this place," she said. It took a long time to remove the wig—it was glued to her hairline—and we kept talking as the sun went down outside her trailer window. She was in a reflective mood. Though she still has extended family in Memphis, her mother, father, and brother all died within the past few years. "When death touches you that close, you say to yourself, 'It's time to start liking who the fuck you are,'" she said. "I'm not perfect, but I'm starting to get comfortable, like a sweater you want to wear all the time."

Her head was tilted back in a wash-bowl, her eyes closed, but her voice still controlled the room. "I'm glad this whole success thing is happening now," she said. "I can't even imagine a twenty-three-year-old Leslie in this position. They would have kicked me off the set after two days. I would have fucked half the dudes in the crew." She sat up and wrapped a towel around her head. "I was a less confident person back then. And damn sure not as funny." ♦

# MY DEMANDS

BY PAUL RUDNICK

My name is Leah-Ellyn Altschuler, and, though I am one of only forty-eight students here at the Shower of Blessings Junior Bible College, in Claramore City, Nebraska, I have been emboldened by the activism of so many students, nationwide. Therefore, I would like to speak out on issues that affect me, and at least two other students in my quad, every day. These demands

2. In my class on harvest imagery in Leviticus, I would like Professor Stamwray to stop saying “Wheat is neat.” *We know.*

3. I insist on more diversity, by which I mean that the college should admit at least one qualified Lutheran student. We must combat stereotypes: Lutherans are not all Motrin-crazed, cider-guzzling bicyclists.

zling Delilahs, be renamed the more respectful Barren Wives of Joshua.

8. I demand that for this year’s Drama Club show, rather than repeating our annual edited-for-blasphemy, fifteen-minute production of “Godspell,” we perform a play I have written, entitled “Jesus Loves Me, So Why Doesn’t That Boy Who Asked Me for Directions Near the Bursar’s Office in My Dream?”

9. I demand that the college appoint an Appropriate Use of Lip Liner facilitator, specifically to deal with Kelli-Nedra Sackett.

10. In the waste-management cubbies at the end of our hall, there should be an additional bin, where Hurtful Thoughts can be recycled into Prayer Mulch.



are well thought out, passionate, and non-negotiable, and if they are not met within twenty-four hours I will barricade myself in the snack bar in the library basement, purchase every last PowerBar from the vending machine, and eat them all. *I mean it.*

1. I demand that at night, when I’m trying to get some sleep, my roommate, Bethany, stop texting her boyfriend, Logan, making little moaning noises, and then showing me the photos that Logan sends, in which he’s in his dorm room in a sleeping bag, wearing only his Mormon undergarment and holding up a hand-lettered sign that says, “AFTER WE’RE MARRIED, I WANT TO KISS YOU.” *It’s gross.*

4. The college must immediately rename the Margaret and Ezekiel Talloran Water Fountain, on the right-hand side of the main lobby, because I know for a fact that Abner Talloran, Ezekiel’s great-great-grandfather, once petitioned to have Nebraska legally change its nickname from the Cornhusker State to the suspiciously vague State of Several Roads.

5. I would like my boyfriend to be more attentive, by which I mean that he should e-mail me fun videos of baby goats in pajamas, just in case I’m feeling blue or studying too hard.

6. I would like a boyfriend.

7. I demand that our table-tennis team, instead of being called the Daz-

11. The college must provide free mental-health care to all students, by which I mean access to clean and relatively new mixing bowls, spatulas, and nonstick cookie sheets.

12. I would like the college to create a safe space for any student who wishes to sit quietly, her eyes shut and earbuds securely in place, wearing a cardigan with sleeves that cover her hands, as she makes tiny, graceful movements with her head and torso to express her solidarity with any song about having confidence, daring to dream, and still having a boyfriend, preferably one who enjoys discussing Scripture without becoming overly graphic. ♦





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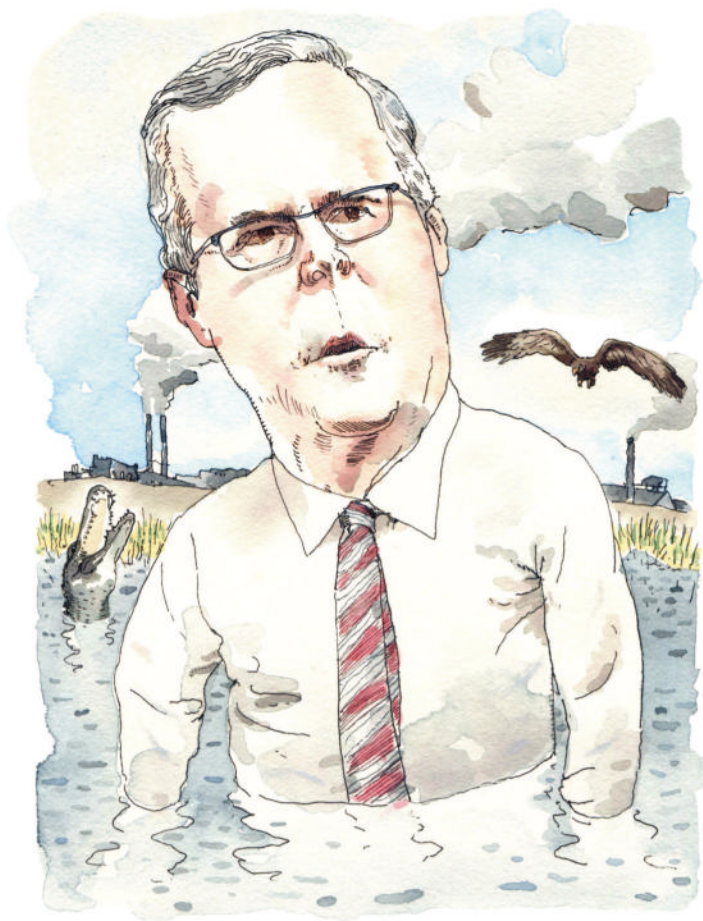
## Paul Fredrick

## THE POLITICAL SCENE

# SWAMPED

*Jeb Bush's fight over the Everglades.*

BY DEXTER FILKINS



On the afternoon of December 11, 2000, Jeb Bush, the forty-third governor of Florida and a member of the most dominant American political family since the Kennedys, stood in the Oval Office with President Bill Clinton to mark the signing of a landmark law intended to restore the Everglades, the majestic swamp that spans the interior of southern Florida. The legislation, overwhelmingly approved by both parties, envisioned spending eight billion dollars to revive the wetland, which, thanks in large part to heedless development, had been shrunk, chopped, polluted, and drained to the point of terminal decline. That same afternoon, the

Supreme Court was hearing *Bush v. Gore*, the case that ended the vote-counting dispute in Florida between Clinton's Vice-President and Jeb's brother. But, if the occasion was awkward for Bush and Clinton, it marked a seeming triumph of federal and state cooperation. The Everglades legislation was the result of years of coordinated planning. The State of Florida and the federal government had promised to share the expense. "This is the restoration of a treasure for our country," Bush said after the ceremony.

Less than three years later, Bush returned to Washington, this time to justify to a group of skeptical Republican

members of Congress why he was dismantling one of the central provisions of Everglades restoration. Just days before, Florida lawmakers had endorsed a bill to drastically weaken pollution regulations—the result of an extraordinary lobbying blitz by the sugar industry, the largest polluter in the Everglades and one of the largest political donors in the state. Newspaper editorial boards around Florida condemned the proposal as a gift to Big Sugar, the nickname for the major interests in the state: Florida Crystals, U.S. Sugar, and the Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative. In a private meeting room at the Capitol, the congressmen who had summoned Bush said the bill was so egregious that it could threaten federal funding for the restoration. Bush insisted that he would not change his mind.

In the Presidential primaries, Bush has spoken little about his record on the environment. As he struggles to revitalize his ailing campaign, he has preferred to talk broadly about his experience as governor—an attempt to contrast himself with insurgents like Donald Trump and Ben Carson, and also with Barack Obama, who, even after seven years in the White House, is described by many Republicans as a political neophyte. (The Bush campaign declined to comment for this article.) In a speech following the recent terrorist attacks in Paris, Bush announced, "We are living in serious times that require serious leadership." In a campaign video, recorded in what appears to be a comfortable suburban living room, he presents himself as a tough, decisive manager. "This is what leadership's about—it's not just about yapping about things," he says, as an image of the White House comes on the screen. "We need to start fixing things. I said I was going to do these things, and I did them. And the result was, Florida's a lot better off."

What lingers in Florida is the memory of a governor who liked to announce "big, hairy, audacious goals"—often shortened to BHAG, pronounced "bee-hag"—and to pursue them zealously. Much of the time, in a state with natural bipartisan coalitions, it worked. But when it didn't Bush pushed on, even at the price of gruelling and expensive

*In Florida, Bush forged a landmark environmental accord—and then exploded it.*



political conflict. Nowhere was his style more evident than in his protracted struggle with the federal government over the fate of the Everglades—a fight that, according to people in both parties, could well have been avoided with a less autocratic approach. Nathaniel Reed, an Assistant Secretary of the Interior in the Nixon Administration, a friend of President George H. W. Bush, and a prominent Florida environmental activist, told me, “Jeb wouldn’t listen to anyone. He’s the most thin-skinned son of a bitch I’ve seen. If you criticize him, he never forgets it.”

**T**he Everglades—the River of Grass, as it is called—covers nearly four million acres across southern Florida in a slow-moving sheet of water, as wide as fifty miles and, in places, only a few inches deep. The swamp is environmentally unique: home to alligators, panthers, manatees—seventy-seven endangered and threatened species in all, many of them unknown in the rest of the United States. For much of the twentieth century, as Michael Grunwald recounts, in his deeply researched book “The Swamp,” the residents of Florida waged an undeclared war on the Everglades, draining and diverting it to provide more space for development and agriculture. By the nineteen-eighties, the water flow had been so diminished that the wading birds—white ibises, egrets, herons—that had once descended by the thousands to hunt fish, had all but disappeared.

In 1988, Dexter Lehtinen, then the acting U.S. Attorney in southern Florida, sued the state regulatory body that oversaw the Everglades for failing to enforce clean-water laws. The suit was politically brazen: Lehtinen, the husband of a soon-to-be Republican congresswoman and an appointee of President Ronald Reagan, was so sure that he would not get permission from the White House that he brought the suit to court only when Reagan’s term was effectively over. The suit infuriated powerful agricultural interests, but federal officials reluctantly allowed it to go forward. Lehtinen recalled, “They ordered me to withdraw the lawsuit, and I said that would be fine, but that I was going to hold a press conference the same day

and it would be on the front page of the *Washington Post*.”

For almost three years, lawyers representing the State of Florida fought the federal suit. Finally, in 1991, a newly elected governor, Lawton Chiles, showed up at a court hearing in Miami and astonished the audience by capitulating. “We want to surrender,” he said. “I want to find out who I can give my sword to.” The federal-state partnership that resulted would be governed by a consent decree—a legal agreement that ends a dispute without acknowledging fault—and enforced by a United States judge. In 1994, with Chiles leading the way, the Florida legislature passed the Everglades Forever Act, committing the state to reach the clean-water standards set in the decree.

That year, Jeb Bush launched his first campaign for governor. He was not quite a carpetbagger; he had come to Florida to support his father’s 1980 Presidential campaign there, then joined a real-estate and construction firm run by a prominent Miami developer named Armando Codina. But he had few local ties and an undeveloped ear for local politics. In his first campaign, he described himself as a “head-banging conservative,” and paid little attention to environmental concerns. “The environment is a big deal in Florida—every politician learns that sooner or later,” Estus Whitfield, an adviser to half a dozen Florida governors, said. Bush narrowly lost to Chiles. When he ran again, in 1998, he toned down his rhetoric and laid out specific plans to protect the environment. This time, he won.

In 2000, when an ambitious state program to acquire environmentally sensitive land was due to expire, Bush set up another one. It provided three hundred million dollars a year, enabling the state to acquire 1.2 million acres during his tenure, which helped make Florida one of the largest holders of land that is off limits to developers. “That’s big money,” David Guest, a lawyer for the environmentalist group Earthjustice, who often opposed Bush’s administration in court, said.

The Everglades presented a more complex challenge. An environmental restoration like the one in the Everglades has four main components: the quality of the water; the amount of it;

the way it is distributed; and the timing of its arrival during the annual cycles of wet and dry weather. By law, only water quality was Florida’s problem exclusively; the other problems were to be addressed by both the state and the federal government. When Bush took office, a multibillion-dollar plan, drawn up by federal and state regulators, was in the works to restore the swamp’s flow. Bush picked up the discussions and, sixteen months later, reached a deal on a landmark law that committed the state to pay for half of the restoration. The bill passed the state legislature unanimously. Congress passed a tandem bill, committing four billion dollars to the initiative, known as the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan; that was the bill that Bush celebrated in the Oval Office with President Clinton. Terrence (Rock) Salt, a retired senior official with the Army Corps of Engineers who helped oversee the plan’s early phases, credited Bush with securing support and funding for the law, saying, “If not for Jeb Bush, we would not be proceeding with Everglades restoration.”

The swamp’s ecosystem depends on unusually clean water. The main source of pollution is runoff from farms, especially the sprawling sugarcane farms that rim the northern tier of the Everglades. The runoff carries fertilizer rich in phosphorus, which even in tiny amounts can fuel explosions of growth—of algae and, especially, of invasive plants like cattails, which smother native plants and animal life. When Lehtinen sued the state, the levels of phosphorus were high enough to push the ecosystem to the verge of collapse. In Lake Okeechobee, at the northern boundary of the Everglades, algae blooms had become so stifling that huge groups of crawfish and snails crawled out of the water in search of oxygen. Cattails were expanding across the swamp by as much as nine acres every day.

The Everglades Forever Act, the law that Bush inherited from Chiles, divided the cleanup into two phases. The first one called for constructing storm-water treatment areas—artificial wetlands that capture and filter farm runoff—and encouraged farmers to adopt “best management practices,” like refraining from spreading fertilizer just

before a rainstorm. By 2003, with the first phase under way, phosphorus levels had dropped dramatically.

The second phase promised to be much more difficult. In 2001, Bush, after consulting with his environmental regulators, had committed the state to an aggressive goal set by the Everglades Forever Act: in five years, phosphorus in the swamp would be reduced to its natural level, no higher than ten parts per billion. Soon afterward, the Audubon Society of Florida sent Bush a letter, saying, "We appreciate your wise and strong support."

But in 2003, as Bush began his second term, scientists for the state, along with the sugar industry, concluded that Florida was likely to miss the deadline. Paul Schwiep, a lawyer who represented environmental groups, said, "Everyone started panicking." The panic had as much to do with money as with science. State regulators had estimated that meeting the deadline would require seven hundred million dollars of additional spending. In the original plan for the cleanup, sugar farmers were required to pay a tax, but ordinary taxpayers bore the bulk of the cost. Florida voters subsequently approved a constitutional amendment requiring polluters—with sugar companies first among them—to pay far more, and, though the amendment was never enforced, it remained on the books.

To get a sense of the ecological challenges facing the Everglades, drive along the top of the levy that encircles the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge, a teardrop-shaped enclave on the swamp's northeastern boundary. Saw grass sweeps to the horizon, in a marshy expanse broken by islands of slash pines and gumbo-limbo trees. The water in the interior of the refuge, accessible only by airboat, is virtually pure; the effects of pollution come into view at the refuge's fringe, as cattails bloom and the saw grass disappears. As you turn onto the western border, the source of that pollution presents itself: mile after mile of sugarcane fields, with runoff flowing through drainage canals directly into the refuge.

Since the nineteen-sixties, sugar has been a dominant force in Florida agriculture, with several hundred thou-

sand acres ringing the northern reaches of the Everglades. The industry is controlled by a small number of people, principal among them Pepe and Alfy Fanjul, brothers from a Cuban family whose sugar farms were nationalized by Castro after the revolution. The Fanjuls preside over one of the world's largest sugar empires, including Florida Crystals, which grows and refines sugar on some hundred and fifty thousand acres in the state. Their companies' revenues, bolstered by federal price supports, have been estimated at five billion dollars a year, and the Fanjuls live in ostentatious luxury. Pepe's eight-thousand-square-foot Palm Beach mansion is valued at about six million dollars; his yacht, the *Azucar* (Spanish for "sugar"), is often used for parties and charity events, following the social circuit from Palm Beach to Sag Harbor.

In addition, the Fanjuls own the largest sugar producer in the Dominican Republic, Central Romana, whose holdings also include interests in tourism, manufacturing, and real estate. A resort they own there—Casa de Campo, a seven-thousand-acre estate with its own international airport, polo grounds, and yacht basin—has hosted both Bush Presidents. In January, Hillary and Bill Clinton visited the Fanjuls there.

According to classified American diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks in 2011, the State Department blamed Pepe Fanjul and representatives of Central Romana for much of the opposition to a regional free-trade agreement, fearing that it would harm their holdings. Fanjul, one cable said, spread rumors that the United States was revoking visas of those who opposed the trade deal—"a patent absurdity," the cable said.

Over the years, the Fanjuls' operations in the United States have been fined numerous times for endangering their workers, most of whom, until the mid-nineties, were brought in from Jamaica and often housed in Third World conditions. In 1992, a Florida judge awarded a group of guest workers fifty-one million dollars, ruling that companies owned by the Fanjuls and others had dramatically underpaid them. (The ruling was overturned on appeal.) Since then, many of the farmworkers have been replaced by machines, which eliminate

the potential for abuse but also reduce the number of jobs that sugar creates.

The need to keep federal tariffs in place and pollution standards at bay makes for a potent incentive. "Given the choice between buying a tractor and hiring a lobbyist, the sugar industry is going to hire a lobbyist every time," Guest, the environmental lawyer, told me. The result is that sugar, despite its relatively limited ability to create jobs, has made itself perhaps the most powerful political force in Florida. Since 1998, according to the National Institute on Money in State Politics, the sugar industry has given at least twenty-one million dollars to Florida candidates, political parties, and PACs. Estus Whitfield, the environmental adviser, said that, after each gubernatorial election, representatives of the industry sit down with the new governor to give him a list of their legislative priorities. "In almost every instance when an Everglades law, rule, or even attitude has changed, it was influenced by the sugar-cane industry," Whitfield said.

The Fanjuls' clout in Washington is legendary. Since 2004, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, the Fanjuls and their relatives have donated nearly four million dollars to federal candidates, parties, and PACs; last year, they spent a million dollars lobbying Congress and other branches of the federal government. The Fanjuls are scrupulously bipartisan; in 2004, Pepe raised more than two hundred thousand dollars for George W. Bush's reelection effort, and in 1992 Alfy was the Florida co-chair for Bill Clinton's campaign. (In one notorious episode, President Clinton received a call from Alfy Fanjul during a tryst with Monica Lewinsky.) When Bush ran for governor in 1998, Florida law limited individual campaign contributions to five hundred dollars a person, and Super PACs were not yet legal. According to the National Institute on Money in State Politics, the sugar industry contributed only ninety-four hundred dollars to Bush in 1998 and eighty-nine hundred in 2002—but, during those years, it gave three-quarters of a million dollars to the Republican Party of Florida. Close observers of Florida politics say that, even then, the real numbers,



for candidates running for statewide office, were much higher than reported, with the industry arranging support from affiliated companies and law firms that it hires. "It's difficult to pin down, but, for a candidate like Jeb, sugar's contribution easily approaches a half million dollars," Bernie Parrish, a long-time lobbyist in Tallahassee, said. (Other veterans of state politics gave me similar estimates.) "As a result, Big Sugar gets what it wants out of the legislature and out of the governor's office," Parrish said. "It doesn't matter who the governor is."

Halfway through the spring, 2003, session of the Florida House of Representatives, a new bill appeared on the schedule without warning. The legislation proposed to amend the Everglades Forever Act: it pushed back the phosphorus deadlines to 2016, with another extension available after that. Its most lenient provisions allowed the deadlines to be evaded indefinitely; all that was required was that the state and the sugar industry show that they were making their best efforts. "It was basically a license for polluters to keep polluting for years and years," Don Jodrey, a senior policy adviser at the Department of the Interior, who works on Everglades issues, said. Representatives of the Audubon Society of Florida, who had saluted Bush's efforts on phosphorus less than two years before, said that they had no idea the legislation was coming. "We were caught completely off guard," Eric Draper, a lobbyist for the organization who is now its executive director, said. "One hearing, and it was up for a vote."

A reporter for the Palm Beach *Post* named Robert King tried to determine who had drafted the bill, but could find no one—in the legislature or in Bush's administration—who would own up to it. But Bush and his staff appear to have had a hand in it. The bill was introduced two weeks after Bush met privately in his Miami office with Pepe Fanjul, one of Fanjul's lobbyists, and an executive from U.S. Sugar. According to documents that I obtained from the Florida Department of State, the agenda of the meeting was "phosphorus ruling/polluter pays."

A lobbyist for U.S. Sugar, Mac Sti-

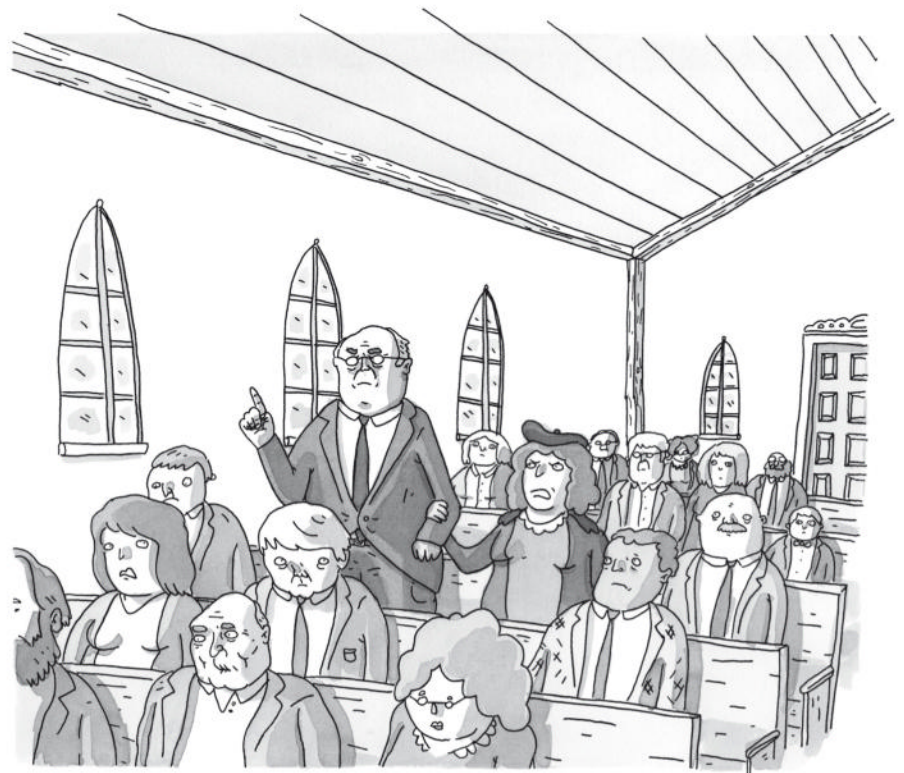
panovich, told me that the Governor led a collaboration between his staff and the industry. "Jeb was very active," he said. "He brought people to the table." Richard Harvey, the former chief E.P.A. regulator in South Florida, said that the sugar manufacturers had agreed to draft the bill and to move it through the legislature—allowing Bush to remain out of the public glare. "The sugar industry was carrying the ball for Bush," Harvey, who is now retired, said. "They said, 'We are going to orchestrate this thing. We are going to get the language we want, and make sure it passes.' Bush went along."

David Struhs, Bush's chief environmental regulator at the time, told me that the legislation shouldn't have caught anyone by surprise. In 2001, when Bush declared that the new phosphorus limit would be ten parts per billion, he and his environmental team anticipated that they would fail to meet the deadline. In Struhs's explanation, even if pristine water was flowing into the Everglades, phosphorus from previous years would keep the levels high: "The laws of man, no

matter how vigorously enforced, do not trump the laws of nature." Bush decided on the deadline, anyway, to avoid federal sanction, Struhs told me. "We couldn't come out and say, 'We can't do this,'" he said.

Federal and state regulators, as well as environmentalists, argued vigorously that "legacy phosphorus" would not be insurmountable. "We could have met the deadlines, but it would have required a huge effort," Guest told me. The problem, these people said, was political: the obvious likely solution was to take land being used by the sugar farmers out of cultivation. Struhs told me the industry was terrified that federal regulations would force the farmers to fallow land: "They said, 'We're going to be out of business in three years.'"

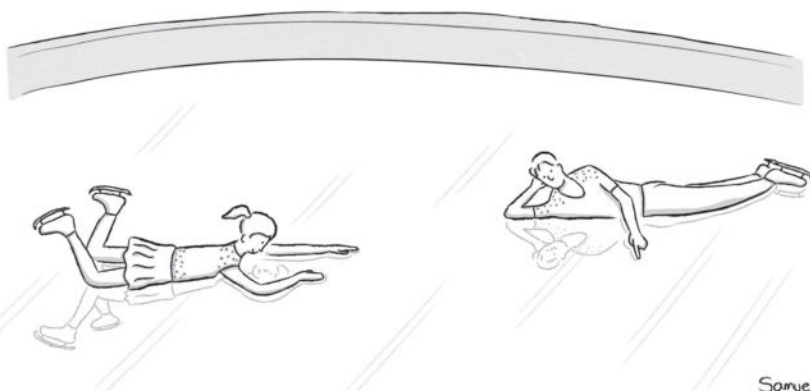
To make sure that the legislation passed, the sugar industry deployed forty-six lobbyists, according to press accounts from the time—more than one for each of the forty senators. Draper, the Audubon Society lobbyist, said that environmentalists had little hope of stopping the bill. When he heard about



Kanin

*"Sit down, Peter, you can't object at a funeral."*

## NARCISSISTS ON ICE



the legislation, he went to Ron Klein, a Democrat who was the senate minority leader, “to help us stop this thing.” Klein sent him to Screven Watson, the former executive director of the Florida Democratic Party. Watson was also a lobbyist for the sugar industry. “That’s when I knew we were doomed,” Draper said.

In the end, the bill passed the Florida senate unanimously, with the clear understanding that Bush was behind it. “We did this bill because the Governor said it was a good bill,” the senate president, Jim King, said. In the house, a small group of legislators mounted an effort to stop the bill, but they were overwhelmingly defeated. The new law marked such a departure from the original Everglades Forever Act that environmentalists devised a bitter nickname for it: the Everglades Whenever Act.

For Bush, the summons to Washington came even before he had signed the bill. In the ornate, high-ceilinged splendor of Capitol Conference Room H-140, he was met by a group of Republican congressmen, three of them from Florida, who helped oversee federal spending on the Everglades. They wanted to tell him bluntly that the legislation awaiting his signature could explode the partnership between Florida and the federal government.

According to two congressional staffers who attended the meeting, Bush

made it clear that he had already decided. “He wasn’t really tolerating any sort of questions,” a former aide said. When the congressmen told Bush that he could be allowing an amount of pollution that would continue to harm the Everglades, he angrily dismissed their concerns. The other staff member said, “I served in government for thirty-four years, twenty on the Appropriations Committee, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone act like that. Bush was angry. He was in my face. He slapped us around. He had absolutely no thought about compromising. I remember thinking, If this guy becomes President, this is not going to work.”

Struhs, Bush’s environmental aide, told me that as the Everglades legislation took shape Bush and his staff consulted with the E.P.A. to make sure that it was legal. “I had a high degree of confidence that the E.P.A. viewed this the same that we did,” he said. But, according to Jodrey, senior officials at the Department of the Interior, which is deeply involved in Everglades oversight, were mortified by the legislation. Jodrey told me his superiors decided that it was necessary to ask President Bush to intercede with his brother. “I was told to write a note in sixth-grade English asking the President to call Jeb,” Jodrey recalled. It’s unclear whether the memo went to the White House, but the President apparently never made the call.

In Miami, though, the judge who oversaw the consent decree summoned state and federal officials to explain themselves. According to Jodrey and Terrence Salt, the former Corps of Engineers official, Justice Department lawyers representing the E.P.A. were ordered not to volunteer any information to the judge. “They were muzzled,” Salt said.

After the hearing, the judge, William Hoeveler, an eighty-year-old senior judge in the Southern District of Florida, released an extraordinary court order, arguing that the law not only potentially violated the consent decree but had been passed in a shamelessly undemocratic way. “The treatment of the bill seemed calculated to avoid federal participation or public scrutiny,” he wrote. As for Bush, he said, “Apparently, he has been misled by people who do not have the best interests of the Everglades at heart.” Hoeveler was so angry that he called several reporters to expand his remarks. When his comments appeared in print, lawyers for the sugar industry pushed to remove him from the case, and he was eventually forced to step aside. Governor Bush was unfazed by the court order. “It is quite an unusual legal statement,” he said. “It didn’t have a lot of law in it.” He signed the Florida legislation a week and a half later.

Two groups sued to block the law’s implementation: a nonprofit called Friends of the Everglades, and the Miccosukee Tribe, Native Americans whose reservation lands sit inside the Everglades. Officials at the E.P.A. are obliged to decide whether local changes in water-quality standards comport with the Clean Water Act. The plaintiffs charged that the regulators, by ruling that Florida’s legislation did not amount to a substantive change in standards, had failed in their duty.

Federal officials say that the new law had been approved in a politically charged atmosphere. Harvey, the E.P.A.’s chief regulator in South Florida, said that when he raised objections he was ignored. Developers seeking permits to build on environmentally sensitive land, he said, were told to bypass him and go to E.P.A. officials in Atlanta, who were appointed by the White House. “You had a Bush in Washington



and a Bush in Florida, and together they felt like they could do whatever they wanted,” Harvey said. Salt said that he and his colleagues were ordered not to speak publicly without approval from the Secretary of the Interior. “They absolutely shut us down,” Salt said. “I felt like I was getting squished.”

Federal officials and environmental activists involved in the dispute saw the new legislation as a larger effort by Jeb Bush to cut out the federal government’s role in the Everglades restoration. In 2004, he unveiled a new program to allow Florida to take greater control. The Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan had produced few results, and Bush blamed the federal government for not providing funds quickly enough. “Unfortunately, Congress did not live up to the promise it made,” he wrote in the *Miami Herald*. In his new plan, called Acceler8, he pledged \$1.5 billion to fund eight Everglades infrastructure projects that had been part of the original CERP.

Acceler8 produced a rush of activity but modest results. Several of the projects were beset by delays, corruption, and inflated costs. A pump station in rural Collier County cost \$617 million—almost twice what was budgeted. The owner of a hundred and sixty acres of scrubland, designated for flooding, refused to sell; after Bush threatened eminent-domain proceedings to force a sale, the state ended up paying nearly five million dollars. In the end, only two of the eight projects were completed, while the rest were either cancelled or given back to the federal government.

As Acceler8 got under way, Bush asked the federal government to withdraw from the consent decree that set the parameters for the Everglades restoration. The debate went all the way to the office of Gale Norton, the Secretary of the Interior. Ultimately, the department declined to release Florida from the decree. “President Bush refused to call his brother to stop the Everglades bill, but he also refused to give in to his brother’s request,” Jordrey said. “It cut both ways.”

In 2008, four years after the environmentalists and the Miccosukee

Tribe sued, a federal judge sided with them in sweeping fashion. Calling the bill “an adroit legislative effort to obscure the obvious,” U.S. District Judge Alan Gold found that the Florida legislature had “violated its fundamental commitment and promise to protect the Everglades.”

The issue remained on hold until 2012, when federal and state regulators, after long negotiations, settled on a revamped plan to clean up the polluted water. Public officials, if not environmental activists, say that they are confident that the Everglades are now back on track. “We are doing very well now,” an official who works on restoration told me. “Charlie Crist? Rick Scott? No problem.”

But federal and state officials of both parties look back on Bush’s administration as a time of stalemate and lost opportunity, largely because Bush derailed the effort to clean up the water in the Everglades for nearly a decade. Under the settlement that resolved the long dispute, the clean-water standard will not need to be met until 2025. The cost of the restoration will be borne primarily by taxpayers, not by the sugar industry. “The goal of Big Sugar is always to put off the day of reckoning,” Draper said.

During the primary campaign, Bush’s few statements about the environment have been carefully tailored to disparate audiences. At a meeting of farmers in Iowa earlier this year,



he called the E.P.A. a “pig in slop” and vowed to “rein in” its regulations. This fall, his campaign sent an e-mail inviting conservation leaders to join his advisers in a private conversation. “Jeb Bush values the many contributions environmental and conservation organizations make every day,” it said. “Governor Bush prioritized these issues in Florida when he was Governor and

believes they deserve understanding and focus during the important policy debate that will occur in the Presidential election.”

A President who wants to aid the environment without empowering the E.P.A. will need to find an innovative way of enforcing the nation’s ecological rules. When it came to restoring the Everglades, Bush’s efforts to carve out his own path pleased almost no one. It was no surprise that delaying water-quality standards enraged environmentalists. But conservatives have also expressed displeasure with Bush’s environmental record. The Club for Growth and other proponents of smaller government have decried his efforts to buy environmentally sensitive land and to spend taxpayer money to restore the Everglades. And the G.O.P.’s libertarian wing, which sees propping up sugar prices as corporate welfare, was angered by his work on behalf of Big Sugar. Bush has been trying to square the circle. His Super PAC, Right to Rise, received half a million dollars from U.S. Sugar in the first half of this year. But in October his campaign announced that the candidate now favored a “phase-out” of the price-support system.

In April, the Fanjul family hosted a fund-raiser for Senator Marco Rubio, of Florida, another candidate for President and, despite his ties to the Tea Party, a staunch backer of price supports for sugar. The cost of entry was twenty-seven hundred dollars a person. And yet it is Bush, for now, who is forced to dispel the assumption that he is beholden to moneyed interests. Asked at one primary debate about the hundred-plus million dollars he has raised so far, he insisted that his donors have given that money only because of his conservative record. In contrast, he pointed to Donald Trump, who, as a contributor to Bush’s gubernatorial campaign, sought permission to bring casinos to Florida. Jeb said that he refused to let him. “I’m not going to be bought by anyone,” he said.

Trump, squinting at the audience, insisted that he would have found a way to get Bush to make a deal on the casino. “I promise I would have gotten it,” he said. ♦

# WHAT MONEY CAN BUY

*Darren Walker and the Ford Foundation set out to conquer inequality.*

BY LARISSA MACFARQUHAR

The urge to change the world is normally thwarted by a near-insurmountable barricade of obstacles: failure of imagination, failure of courage, bad governments, bad planning, incompetence, corruption, fecklessness, the laws of nations, the laws of physics, the weight of history, inertia of all sorts, psychological unsuitability on the part of the would-be changer, the resistance of people who would lose from the change, the resistance of people who would benefit from it, the seduction of activities other than world-changing, lack of practical knowledge, lack of political skill, and lack of money. Lack of money is a stubborn obstacle, but not as hopelessly unyielding as some of the others, and so would-be world-changers often set out to overcome it. Some try to raise money, but that can be depressing and futile. Others try to make money, but it's hard to make enough. There is a third, more reliable way to overcome this obstacle, however, and that is to give away money that has already been made by somebody else, and has already been allocated to world-changing purposes. This is the way of the grant-makers of the Ford Foundation.

Ford's grant-makers are employed "for the general purpose of advancing human welfare," so their work requires determining what human welfare consists of and how best to advance it. This being no simple matter, they spend a great deal of time on it and frequently revise their conclusions. Of course, even with money, changing the world is difficult. The grant-makers know that many of their ideas will not work, and that even those which do will only go so far, because of all the other obstacles. Still, compared to others with similar ambitions, they possess a rare and heady blend of power and freedom: they are beholden to no one, neither consumers nor shareholders nor clients nor donors nor voters, and they have half a billion

dollars each year to spend on whatever they like.

"Good morning, Ford Foundation, and Happy New Year!" Darren Walker cried, to loud applause. "How great it is to be at the Ford Foundation on January 6th and doing the work we do!"

Walker, the foundation's tenth president, who took over in 2013, stood on a stage in the Ford Foundation building, on East Forty-third Street, in New York City, but his beaming face also appeared on screens thousands of miles away, in Ford offices throughout the world: in Mexico City and Rio and Santiago; in Cairo and Lagos, Nairobi and Johannesburg; in Delhi, Beijing, and Jakarta. The auditorium in which he stood was a relic of Ford's past, still furnished with chocolate tufted-leather seats from 1967, with sliding brass ashtrays under the armrests. To the right of the stage was written a series of words that described Ford's hoped-for future: Justice, Opportunity, Voice, Dignity, Creativity, Change, Visionaries. Walker himself was beloved for his democratic exuberance, manifested both in his vivacious clothing (his jaunty ties, his pocket squares, his pig cufflinks) and in his untiring enthusiasm.

"There is a lot going on at the Ford Foundation," he declared. "So fasten your seat belts!"

Arriving in his office, Walker found that it was filled with Kenyans. A Kenyan delegation was to meet with Michelle Obama there the following day, and an advance party of ten or twelve people had come to inspect the room. The advance party wanted to determine who would sit where: Would Walker sit at the head of the table, as he usually did, or would he sit at the side of the table, facing the First Lady, so that neither took precedence? And, if the latter, would the chair at the head of the table sit empty, or would it be re-

moved and put somewhere else? The delegation wanted to know how many other chairs there would be around the table and, if more chairs became necessary, whether they would be added to the table, in ambiguous relation to those already there, or placed in an unequivocally secondary tier around the periphery of the room. Being the president of a social-justice foundation, Walker normally considered it his business to disrupt such hierarchical modes of thinking, but he also considered it his business to be sensitive to the differing requirements of other cultures, and, besides, he always liked to be a welcoming host, and so, gently buffeted by these conflicting impulses, he chose the middle path of benevolent passivity and stood, hands clasped, and smiled at the Kenyans as they circled his table.

He had done his best to make his office a place where this sort of hierarchical etiquette was hard to take seriously. He had recently disseminated a short video of himself dancing and leaping about there, with uncommon balletic skill, to the tune of Pharrell Williams's song "Happy." On his bookshelves were a furry red Elmo; a yellow cow; a shiny blue miniature Jeff Koons puppy; a miniature yellow-and-green rickshaw from Delhi; a miniature red rickshaw from Jakarta; a large framed portrait of his English bulldog, Mary Lou; a small framed portrait of his partner, David Beitzel; and a couple of small gold Buddhas, among many other objects that he'd picked up on his nearly constant travels. There were, in addition, things that expressed his deeper commitments: a photograph of Martin Luther King, Jr., marching from Selma to Montgomery, in 1965, but in a quiet moment—King looking off to one side, Ralph Abernathy walking beside him, reading a newspaper. The Ford building was shortly to be renovated, and he had decreed that his splendid presidential





Walker at the Ford headquarters. "In the sixties, when you came to see the president," he says, "it was meant to be intimidating."



suite—which now included a kitchen, a shower, and a conference room that sat forty—should be reduced to half its size. “In the sixties when you came to see the president, it was meant to be intimidating,” Walker says. “It was like you were being presented to the emperor. But it’s not me. I’m not a white guy from the Harvard class of 1955!”

Ford had recently decided, in fact, that inequality was the problem of the times—more than climate change, for instance, or extremism. The foundation had been accused for years of spreading itself too thin. (The budget for 2015 was five hundred and eighteen million, but it was amazing how fast you could run through half a billion dollars with a world to fix.) So now it was going to do something dramatic: it was going to work on inequality and nothing else. The crucial task, everyone agreed, was to “disrupt the drivers of inequality.” In order to do that, it was necessary to ascertain what those drivers were, so program officers all around the world had been instructed to write reports identifying the chief drivers of inequality in their regions. After those reports were

collected, many, many meetings were held in the conference rooms of the New York office.

Some big changes that were not negotiable had been made already: the pursuit of “Internet rights” was to be added to Ford’s portfolio, and L.G.B.T. rights in the U.S. was to be subtracted, since that issue had achieved such momentum that Ford’s money could be better spent elsewhere. But there were still dozens of issues the grant-makers wanted to work on, and it was difficult to decide how to characterize the relationships between them. Should Women’s Agency and Racial/Ethnic/Indigenous Justice be grouped under the larger heading of Inclusion? What about Human Rights Architecture and Imagining Inclusive Capitalism? The main category they were working on was “thematic areas,” in which Ford would seek to disrupt drivers of inequality by means of strategies. There was to be a minimum of four and a maximum of eight thematic areas, with a minimum budget of twenty million dollars apiece. But should a thematic area be required to disrupt more than one driver of inequal-

ity, or was one enough? Did each thematic area lend itself to a race, class, and gender analysis? Did each strategy support the agency and voice of marginalized groups? Besides the thematic areas and strategies, there were also “lines of work,” “sets,” “challenges,” and “lenses,” and there was a certain lack of clarity on the difference between these things. The program officers were practical people, but these negotiations had ensnared them for months.

One person wanted to know why they kept talking about “disrupting,” since it was so negative. Negativity in the meetings was rare. There were some disagreements, but on the whole the tone was one of patient encouragement. (“I want to thank you for putting this so clearly, and so well.” “I feel like I heard a number of helpful building blocks.”) It was important to Ford to model, in its way of working, the kind of society it wanted to produce: less unequal, more inclusive—a safe space with enough room for everyone’s questions and problems. It was felt that this was not only intrinsically good but also insured that everyone felt personally invested in the result. On the other hand, the commitment to niceness had a tendency to muffle aggressive criticism. “The culture of overweening politeness in American philanthropy is leading to our ruin,” Albert Ruesga, the president of the Greater New Orleans Foundation, recently fumed to the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*. “It keeps me from telling you, in the clearest possible terms, that your five-year, \$2-million initiative to end homelessness is well-intentioned magical thinking at best and boneheaded ignorance at worst.”

Besides questions of categorization, the program officers debated questions of tactics. For instance, how much money should be devoted to work that helped people right away, such as encouraging self-determination in girls from traditional societies, and how much to long-term, long-shot prospects for change, such as art? Ford believed in supporting art as a means of disrupting dominant narratives, but art didn’t always do what you wanted it to. Was it better to work on issues that people were currently agitated about, or to draw attention to ones that nobody was addressing? Was it better to be bold and



*“I spy something red.”*



risk failure, or to give money to a project that had a good chance of success? And how soon would success have to happen in order to count—five years? Ten? Was it better to be patient or impatient? On the one hand, social justice wasn't the sort of thing that happened overnight; on the other hand, there had to be some point at which a program could be declared a failure and cut off, or there would be no accountability at all.

This issue of accountability had become more pressing in the previous decade. In the early days, Ford program officers had spent a lot of time coming up with projects that had the potential to be important, or seeking out urgent problems and solutions that seemed as though they ought to work. But, once the money was spent, they didn't always assess whether the projects had, in fact, turned out to be important, or whether the solutions that ought to have worked had solved the urgent problems or not. This was in part because of a rule of thumb at Ford that program officers should stay in their jobs no more than eight years, lest they become complacent. Thus, by the time a project was established enough to be evaluated, its progenitor had moved on, and the replacement was not usually sufficiently interested in his predecessor's enterprises to spend time and money figuring out whether they had succeeded. "The front end is where people spent their time, and the back end they didn't," Lincoln Chen, the president of the China Medical Board, who ran Ford's Delhi office in the nineteen-eighties, says. "Evaluation is very time-demanding and costly. Individual projects were monitored, but they weren't independently or scientifically evaluated. I can tell you what I thought was successful, but in many cases evaluations require a generation, or a decade or more. For instance, the institute of management in Ahmedabad is a great success, but it would have taken a decade or longer to know that. The model villages were less successful, but we didn't know they weren't working for ten or fifteen years."

Some critics had attempted to address these problems in foundation work by promoting what they called "strate-

gic philanthropy." Donors ought to behave more like investors, they argued. A prudent investor would never put his money into a company and just leave it there, hoping for the best: he would track his returns, and if they did not meet his expectations he would withdraw his funds and invest them somewhere else. Donors ought likewise to evaluate their programs with precise metrics in order to make sure of a good return on their charitable dollar. "Out-



come-oriented philanthropic buyers look for the best service in their areas of interest for the lowest cost," Paul Brest, the former president of the Hewlett Foundation, wrote in a strategic-philanthropy manifesto. "Philanthropic investors provide risk capital to social entrepreneurs."

The idea that foundations should evaluate their projects more carefully was not particularly controversial, but how they should do that was far from clear. Should a foundation try to guide and steer its grantees, as venture capitalists did with startups? Or should it trust that grantees, who were actually doing the work in the field, knew best what worked and what didn't? Most grantees were not startups, and were liable to become resentful if foundation officers started meddling—though of course they would hide that resentment for fear of losing the grant. And, resentment aside, if a foundation started telling its grantees what to do, would it then become an initiative-crushing central planner, stifling the very grassroots innovation and practical know-how that it purported to encourage? On the other hand, if a foundation took a hands-off approach, was it any more than a writer of checks?

One way foundations tended to be hands-on was by sponsoring particular projects. Ford had been criticized for years for giving small project grants rather than larger grants for general

operating support that would enable an organization to pay its rent and thrive in the long term. The program officers were determined to do better on that front. On the other hand, they knew that if you gave *too* large a grant an organization would expand rapidly to take advantage of it, because if the money wasn't used it wouldn't be replenished; but then you had created a totally new type of organization that was dependent on grants and, if they were withdrawn, would collapse. You could drown an organization with too much money the way you could drown a plant.

In addition to the issue of interference, there were other questions that troubled strategic philanthropy. If donors and nonprofits felt that they had to measure their results, might that not lead them to focus on limited sorts of things that could be measured precisely: administering vaccines, for instance, rather than attempting to improve overall health; or counting missed days of school rather than evaluating student achievement? And what would happen to things that could not properly be measured at all, such as oppression, or justice? What about initiatives whose success could take decades to become evident, such as social movements or the erosion of cultural norms?

All these problems were not so bothersome for development foundations. A development foundation, like Gates or Rockefeller, generally had certain concrete things that it wanted to get done, and these things could often be measured. It might want to drill wells, for instance, or disseminate an improved type of seed; it might want to immunize babies in a given region, or administer deworming medicine. But Ford was not a development foundation: it was a social-justice foundation, and a social-justice foundation was concerned more with amorphous entities such as fairness and exclusion than with material well-being.

There tended to be a slight flaring of the nostrils at Ford at the way some other people used the term "development," which implied that there was only one way for a country to succeed—and that was to become like the developed world, with its cars and its air-conditioning and its secularism and its



nuclear power and its shopping malls. It implied that the developed world got that way through “industrialization,” a largely benign matter of improving technology. There was no reminder, in the optimistic and apolitical notion of “development,” that industrialization had depended upon slavery and colonial plunder in the past, or that it might lead to environmental disaster in the future.

Ford thought of itself as the sort of foundation whose staff did not dictate what its grantees should do but sought out grantees with ideas and methods of their own: that was the social-justice way. But, ironically, this meant that it required far more staff than it would if it came up with its own ideas and hired people to execute them. Coming up with ideas to be executed was the sort of thing that could be done in a meeting at headquarters; but finding small, local N.G.O.s and community leaders and artists and researchers to fund in dozens of countries around the world required offices in those countries, with program staff and administrative staff and maintenance staff and gardeners and drivers, plus money for travel and hosting meetings and all the rest of it. Ford’s expenses were enormous: more than a billion dollars in the past decade. In 2013, it spent around eighty million on personnel (both staff and consultants) and twenty million on office space, travel, and meetings. Its budgets weren’t out of line with those of other large

foundations, and its staff wasn’t more lavishly paid, but, still, the numbers were startling. Humility was expensive.

One of the reasons that Walker was an ideal president for the Ford Foundation was that his life was an example of just the sort of social transformation that Ford’s programs were intended to produce. He was born in 1959 in a charity hospital in Lafayette, Louisiana. His father had left by that time—the man on his birth certificate was someone else. When he was three or four, his mother moved the family to Ames, Texas, where her Aunt Ida lived, and Aunt Ida babysat the kids while his mother got trained as a nurse’s aide in Liberty, the white town next to Ames. At one point, a young woman with a clipboard knocked on the door looking for poor, rural black children, and asked his mother if she wanted to enroll her son in a new government program called Head Start. She said yes, and he was placed in a preschool in a nearby church, where he learned to read. Sometime later, his mother moved the family again, to Goose Creek, an oil town east of Houston.

His great-uncle Daddy C, who lived near Goose Creek, saw everything in terms of race. He said that white people would never allow a black person to succeed. Daddy C had grown up in a small Texas town where the schools for black kids went only through third

grade; after that, you went to work in the fields. When he married Walker’s great-aunt Big, they moved to Houston, and he got a job as a porter and shoeshine at a gas company. Walker’s mother never scolded him, rarely even told him what to do, but Daddy C was more old-fashioned and kept him in line. Walker was always asking questions, always talking, always hyperactive and jumping around, and grownups found all this energy hard to take. If he saw someone get hurt, he would start to cry, and grownups didn’t like that, either—boys weren’t supposed to be so sensitive.

One day when he was in third grade, something happened at school and he got very upset, and was crying and careening around, and his teacher told him to sit down and he didn’t. After class, the teacher, Mrs. Majors, called him over. He remembered what she said to him all his life. “She said, ‘Darren, you are going to have to come to grips with what you want to be. Because if you continue acting out the way you are acting out, you are not going to amount to anything. You’re getting in trouble too much, and little black boys like you who get in trouble a lot are not going to do well in this society. But there is a different road for you, because you are smart, you read well, you have a thirst for learning.’ And I had never heard this term, but she told me, ‘You need to understand self-control.’ And I realized then that I needed an internal mechanism to discipline my natural instincts.” He started telling himself inside his head that he had to have self-control, he had to have self-control, and when he felt like talking non-stop in class, or raising his hand for the fourth time, or getting up out of his seat when he wasn’t supposed to, he didn’t. And as he got older he saw that he was the only black boy in the advanced track at school, and that the black boys who did not get hold of themselves, and did not have self-control, were banished from the school’s mainstream and put in special ed and never came back.

He had some cousins who lived in Rayne, Louisiana, the small town where his mother was born, and those cousins’ lives turned out very differently from his. He used to visit them in the summer.



They lived in the black part of Rayne, which had sewage ditches that ran along the roads; in the white part, there was regular plumbing. When he was little, he would ask his relatives why it smelled so bad there, and they would tell him to mind his own business. His cousins started shoplifting and were caught, and once they got into the criminal-justice system as teen-agers there were no second chances, and six of them ended up in prison. One cousin hanged himself in the Acadia Parish jail. One morning at breakfast, his mother was crying as she poured his cereal, and he found out that another one of his cousins had been in a robbery and had been shot dead by a policeman.

But that wasn't going to happen to him. He had self-control, and he worked hard in school, and he always dressed well, in khakis and Brooks Brothers oxford shirts and V-neck sweaters from Neiman Marcus that were hand-me-downs from a white family his great-aunt Big worked for. He looked so good that his teachers were suspicious. They said to him, Did you steal that? Where did you get those clothes? He saw that nice clothes were important, that they changed people's view of you. If he was going to succeed, he had to suit up, every day. On the other hand, he saw that some richer people resented his dressing the way they did.

He was elected homeroom representative of his sixth-grade class, and that made a big impression on him. He had always felt ambitious; even when he was tiny, he wanted to be in charge of things, and now he knew it could happen. Each time he was elected to one thing, he looked up to the next. In high school, he was elected president of the class. Daddy C was still telling him that a black boy could not succeed in Texas, that white people would never allow it, but now he argued back. He said, *I am succeeding, look at me.*

All his life, he felt that the world was rooting for him. This was the key to everything. He felt that he was running down the football field of life and at every yard line there was somebody cheering. And it wasn't just his family and his neighbors who supported him, he noticed. There were always other people, white people, who helped him, too: teachers like Mrs. Majors; parents

of white friends; people who told him he was smart, who advised him about what he needed to do to get ahead. Even the government was on his side, he believed: it had helped him with Head Start, and then it helped him again with Pell Grants, which paid for college. There were also white people who did not want him to get ahead, of course—parents who didn't want him to be friends with their kids, the Klan chapter in Goose Creek, the people who yelled “nigger” at him from the windows of pickup trucks. But he chose not to think about those people as much as the other kind.

Everything at school was going well for him, but his home was chaotic and violent. There was always swearing, always screaming. There were a couple of stepfathers when he was growing up, both of whom beat his mother. His mother was not good at defending herself, and, working the long hours she did, she needed help running things, so even when he was quite young she didn't feel like a parent to him: he was her partner. He was, in many ways, the man of the house. It was hard not having a father, but it was also liberating. When his mother worked late, he fixed dinner for his two younger sisters, cleaned the kitchen, did the laundry. He held jobs after school and on weekends to bring in money, bagging groceries or working in restaurants. Then one day when he was fifteen he found his stepfather—the father of his sisters—beating up his mother again. He dragged him off her and told his mother that they had to leave, right now, that day.

When he was in high school, black adults told him, Don't go to the University of Texas, it's a bad place for black people, but Walker knew that the University of Texas was the best school in the state, it was where prominent Texans went to college, so he wanted to go there, too. He arrived in Austin in the summer of 1978, and for him it was like going to Paris. The wide lawns, the grand plazas, the tower, the fountain, the white buildings, all alike, with the orange tiled roofs! But the dazzling campus was not the half of it. When he talked to teachers in high school about jobs, they told him, You need a trade, you're smart, how about becoming an accountant? But when he talked to his college adviser

the adviser said, You don't go to college to get a job—you go to college to get an education! You don't need to learn a trade—you need to read Chaucer! At first, this thought was so foreign to him that he barely understood it.

He wanted to belong to things, he was a joiner, but he didn't know anybody, so he responded to every flyer he saw. He signed up for the Liberal Arts Council; he joined the Black Student Alliance; he practically lived at the Student Union. He worked at the student-run art gallery, planning shows. He wanted to be part of everything, and he had nothing to lose. He was elected chair of the Student Union and was the first black Abbot of the Friar Society, and he was in the yearbook so much they thought about calling it “The Cactus Yearbook, featuring Darren Walker.”

He never came out as gay explicitly, but he never felt that this was a problem. He sensed that his family had always known that he was different and accepted him as such, even though they never talked about it. At college, he felt that people understood that he was gay, and he knew that there had always been a place in Southern culture for gay men, even if they weren't called that. Anyhow, when it came to the barriers he had to leap over just to get out of bed in the morning at the University of Texas, being gay was nothing compared to being black, or being from the kind of place he was from. There were middle-class white people who were gay, but there were no middle-class white people who were black, or poor. No barrier was too high for him, though, because he believed that he could succeed, and when people tried to help him he didn't feel insulted: he was grateful, he wanted to learn.

“I didn't grow up coming to the dinner table,” he says. “I remember going home to Dallas with one of my suitmates for a weekend or a football game or something. His mother had a dinner, and she was a Texan lady, I mean she had the whole dinner setup, and I was mortified—I had no idea there was a salad fork and a regular fork. But they explained it all, and his mother sent me ‘Tiffany's Table Manners for Teenagers.’ I mean, I had no idea! I had never heard of Emily Post. And I realized,

Oh, my God, I have to run out and get this Emily Post book. And I did! Of course I did! Are you kidding? I had to study it, because I didn't know that you were supposed to wear a navy suit to dinner! I had no idea that during the day you could wear a sports jacket! And all of a sudden I was thrust into this place where these rules mattered."

After college, he enrolled in law school at the University of Texas, because people he admired were lawyers. He knew, too, that when he was done with his education he would need to work for a corporate firm and start earning some serious money, because he had to take care of his mother and he had to send his younger sisters to college. He graduated from law school in 1986 and moved to New York to work at Cleary, Gottlieb, Steen & Hamilton, but he found the hours oppressive, so he went to work on the trading floor at UBS selling mortgage-backed securities. He was a good trader, though not a great one; his genius at the time was for friendships and social connections. He knew everyone. He moved in many circles—gay circles, transplanted-Southerner circles, banking circles, African-American circles. He joined boards and committees. He went to society parties on the Upper East Side and appeared in *Avenue*; he went to parties in Bed-Stuy and Harlem.

When he was in his early thirties, he met David Beitzel. Beitzel was a Wasp from Westchester, but he was not into the uptown life at all. He was an art dealer with a contemporary-art gallery in SoHo; his whole life was south of Fourteenth Street. But they had one mutual friend, and this mutual friend threw a birthday party. Beitzel arrived at the party, and as he opened the door he heard a laugh—a big, loud, roaring Texas guffaw—coming from somewhere inside, and he thought, Whoever that is, laughing like that, I have to meet him. He made his way to the back of the room and saw that the laughing man had taken over the bar area and was making Texas margaritas for everyone and holding forth to a circle of people gathered around. The man had a kind of indomitable ex-

uberance about him, as though, whatever he was saying, what he was really saying was, Isn't this *fantastic*? Aren't we having the greatest time? There is nowhere on earth I would rather be than right here at this party with you!

They started talking about art, and later they talked about dance and English bulldogs. Beitzel left his loft on Mercer Street, and Walker left his penthouse on West Forty-seventh Street, and they moved into an apartment in Chelsea. Twenty-two years later, they were still together, living with their English bulldog, named Mary Lou, after Beitzel's mother—the successor to their previous English bulldog, who was named Beulah, after Walker's mother. Walker knew that some people found Wasps stiff and reserved, but he loved the reserve of Beitzel's family. After all the chaos and screaming and violence that he grew up with, all that quiet, all that calm, felt like heaven.

In April, 1991, he was walking by the receptionist on the way to his desk at UBS when he saw the cover of that week's *Economist*: a photograph of a young black boy in a baseball cap and the cover line "America's Wasted Blacks." He was shocked by it—it was so raw, almost offensive. He brought the magazine back to his desk and read the article and thought, It is time for me to do something about this. He started volunteering at the Children's Storefront School, in Harlem. He started working for the school more and more,

until his boss told him he had to choose between the school and the bank, because he was letting his trading work slide. He had already helped to put his younger sisters through college: he had done his duty to his family. When he was thirty-five, he quit the bank and started volunteering for the school full-time.

A year later, he took a job at the Abyssinian Development Corporation. Even though he was working in a tiny, dark room in the basement of an apartment building on 138th Street, he showed up every day looking as if he were ready to lunch with Mrs. Rockefeller—Hermès tie, pocket square, Belgian loafers. When he started working in Harlem, there were rats everywhere,

and most of the brownstones seemed to be either cemented up or taken over as crack houses. The food in the bodegas all seemed to be past its sell-by date. But he was convinced that Harlem could be great again. He saw that the houses were beautiful and the avenues wide, that the major subway lines came through, that it was easy to get to the airport, that there were parks. The trick was how to rejuvenate without displacing all the people who already lived there.

Every day at Abyssinian, there was an endless list of small problems to solve—people who needed to move from shelters to housing, parents wanting to enroll their kids in Head Start. He campaigned for big things, too, like the Pathmark supermarket that opened on 125th Street in 1999 and changed the neighborhood forever. Harlem, he liked to say, was a place where you could make money; there was no reason there shouldn't be for-profit businesses as well as charities. But, even so, it was hard going, bringing in the big stores: he campaigned for a bookstore, too, and the representatives of national chains told him that they wouldn't open a bookstore in Harlem because black people didn't read.

In between the big things and the small things, he raised lots and lots of money. Raising money from foundations could be humiliating—once, he had to wait forty-five minutes for a program officer to show up, and when she finally arrived she didn't even apologize for being late. He resolved never to behave like that to someone who needed his help. A lot of the time, when foundation people came to see the work he was doing, he felt like a guide for poverty tourists. A program officer told him he wanted to bring his board uptown, and Walker said, Great, let's meet at 138th Street and walk around the neighborhood, and the program officer said he didn't think the board would feel comfortable walking in Harlem—couldn't they just rent a bus and drive around? He had seen buses like that, visitors from downtown staring out the windows as if they were on safari.

But raising money from individuals was easy; he had so many rich friends, and he had no trouble asking them. He knew that people loved to be part of something exciting, and he was good at making Abyssinian sound like the most



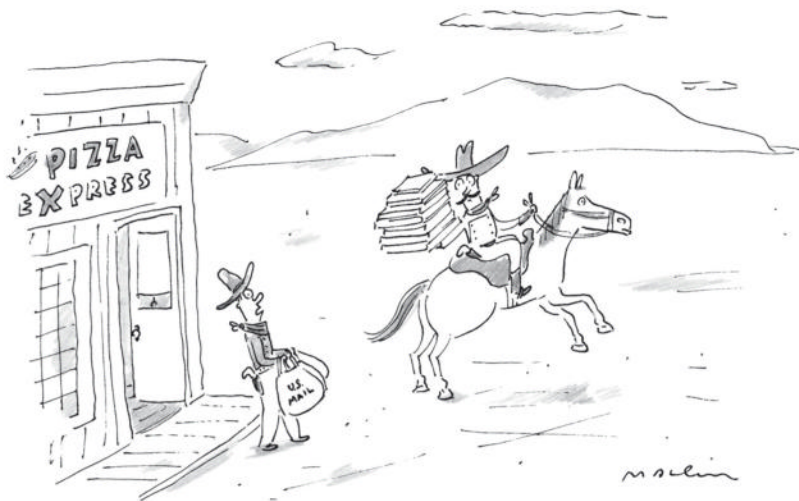


exciting thing around. Soon, he had quintupled Abyssinian's budget. For a long time, he was so gripped by his work in Harlem that he didn't want to do anything else, but in 2002 he was offered a job at the Rockefeller Foundation, heading up the national urban program, and he left.

The first thing he noticed when he arrived at Rockefeller was a strange sense of calm. There was a slow deliberateness to the way things moved that he wasn't used to—there was no sense of urgency. There was no sense of urgency, he gradually realized, because the people at Rockefeller had no one to answer to. On Wall Street, he always had clients breathing down his neck, and at Abyssinian there were always people lining up in the office who needed his help that very minute. But at Rockefeller the people who needed help were far away—distant supplicants who communicated through applications and waited months for an answer. The supplicants had no right to demand anything—they took what they could get and were grateful for it. Once, he noticed that a person who reported to him was about to go on vacation leaving a stack of grant files on his desk—files that represented more than a million dollars that couldn't be disbursed to the nonprofits waiting for them until they were processed. He asked how the person could think of going on vacation before the files were dealt with, and the person said that it wasn't a problem, he would take care of them when he got back.

He was determined not to become an arrogant grant-maker who believed that people were deferential toward him and invited him to things and laughed at his jokes solely because of his own charm and intelligence. When he took over at Ford, he was determined to remember that even though he had half a billion dollars a year at his disposal, and his grantees were compelled to beg him for some, and he could say no to any one of them and that would be the end of it, still, it was those grantees and their work that gave his work meaning. It was a strange and uncomfortable thing to be a social-justice person in a social-justice foundation committed to ending inequality and yet to find yourself every day in relations that could scarcely be less equal.

## LESSER-KNOWN PIVOTAL MOMENTS IN HISTORY



*"I'm a-thinkin', Luke—as long as we're deliverin' pizza, why not deliver the mail."*

All week, every week, people pitched ideas at him, and he said yes or no. He knew that he could make mistakes, and that worried him. He liked to remind himself of a letter to Maya Angelou someone had found in the archives, telling her in a very perfunctory way that she could forget about a grant since she had no talent worthy of the Ford Foundation. Of course, he also liked to remember that Ford had been among the first to fund Gloria Steinem and Muhammad Yunus, the microfinance pioneer, and that James Baldwin wrote "Another Country" on a Ford grant. But, no matter how often he checked himself, he knew that in the end it was almost impossible for a grant-maker to be sure that he was doing his job well, because there was no one to tell him the truth: his grantees had to stay on his good side, and his colleagues didn't know any better than he did. He was perched on the top of a mountain of money so high that he could barely see the bottom.

**I**n 1973, Henry Ford II spoke bitterly and at length to Charles T. Morrissey, an interviewer for the Ford Foundation archives.

FORD: I made a lot of mistakes, but the biggest mistake I ever made was to

give up control of the Ford Foundation. It was a horrendous error. I never should have done it.

MORRISSEY: Why? Why do you feel that way?

FORD: Because I think the Foundation's been a fiasco from my point of view from day one. And it got out of control and it got in the control of a lot of liberals. . . . I've tried to break up the Foundation several times and have been unsuccessful. . . . I didn't have enough confidence in myself at that stage to push and scream and yell and tell them to go fuck themselves, you know, which I should have done.

The foundation was established by Henry Ford II's father, Edsel Ford, the son of Henry Ford, in Michigan in 1936, with a gift of twenty-five thousand dollars. At first, it was a small, local foundation funding mostly small, local things. But, after Edsel Ford died, in 1943, and Henry Ford died, in 1947, and willed to the foundation a large chunk of the nonvoting stock of the Ford Motor Company, it became clear that the foundation was going to become, overnight, the largest philanthropic organization in the world. It was not exactly generosity that inspired the gift: if the stock had gone to the

Ford children, they would have owed so much in taxes—more than three hundred million dollars—that, in order to pay, they would have had to sell stock in such quantities as to lose control of the company to the public. In addition, Henry and Edsel Ford instructed in their wills that all inheritance taxes—around forty million dollars—be paid by the foundation. Motives notwithstanding, it was a source of bemusement to conservatives ever after that the money made by the arch-conservative Henry Ford, the publisher of “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” in a system and spirit of unfettered capitalism, should have fallen into the hands of liberals. When John Olin, the founder of the conservative Olin Foundation, died, in 1982, he decreed that his foundation should not exist in perpetuity, lest it be taken over by the kind of lefty forces that had taken over Ford.

FORD: It got all mixed up at going off in all directions, getting into all kinds of nutty liberal causes. . . . I mean, you know, Mike [Mitchell] Sviridoff; Christ! he’s off doing nutty things with [Cesar] Chavez and all. We got into a lot of trouble back in the old days in the South where the Ford dealers were bitching like hell about all the things we were doing down South. And when you’re in the consumer business and you’ve also got the Foundation around your neck, you’re in trouble almost day and night because they’re always doing something that irritates somebody and why irritate somebody that’s going to buy your product. . . . You know, we only exist because we’re smart enough to sell something for a profit and we can get thrown out or we can go broke; but those people, they’ve got nobody to answer to.

Relations between the Fords and the foundation grew worse and worse, until, finally, in 1977, Henry Ford II resigned as a trustee of the foundation and severed its ties to the family.

MORRISSEY: Has it been hard to maintain this Detroit connection?

FORD: Yes, very hard. Very hard all the way along. Ridiculously hard. These people always forget where the money

came from and I don’t ever forgive them for that.

For nearly forty years, the Ford family and the Ford Foundation had little to do with one another. The foundation, with its fancy building in Manhattan and its global outlook, did not pay much attention to the foundering Midwestern city from which it had come. But Walker hated the idea of all that bad feeling, so when he became president he wrote a letter to Mrs. William Clay Ford, Sr., the former Martha Firestone, of Firestone Tire and Rubber, the widow of Edsel Ford’s son, and, since her husband’s death, the owner of the Detroit Lions. And last year the foundation committed a hundred and twenty-five million dollars to the “grand bargain,” which rescued Detroit from bankruptcy and saved the Detroit Institute of Art.

The grand bargain was instigated by Gerald E. Rosen, a judge who had been appointed chief mediator in the city’s bankruptcy case. Rosen called a meeting with the heads of some of the richest foundations in the country and asked them to bail out Detroit and the Detroit Institute of Art, so the D.I.A. didn’t have to sell its paintings to pay its debt. It was an unprecedented request: foundations had never bailed out a city before; it wasn’t what they did. But Rosen was persistent, and he found, in Walker, a person who liked to salve old wounds, and who did not find Detroit provincial or insignificant but was moved by the desperation of a formerly great American city. In the early stages of the grand-bargain negotiations, it was said that it was the D.I.A. against the pensioners—rich white art lovers against elderly black city workers—but Walker refused to think in those terms. In his mind, the bargain would be a win for both: the D.I.A. was good for Detroit. It was necessary, perhaps, for the president of the Ford Foundation, which had always given money to both art and social justice, to refuse to see funding one as a decision to deprive the other. In the end, some pensioners took cuts of a few percentage points, and the D.I.A. didn’t sell anything at all. And in June Mrs. William Clay Ford, Sr., hosted a dinner for the Ford Foundation board with several dozen

Fords in attendance. It was the first time the board had met in Detroit in sixty years.

In the early days after Henry Ford’s death, the foundation’s chief problem was how to spend its money fast enough, as it gushed into its bank accounts in eye-popping quantities. It was suspected in certain quarters, most notably at the I.R.S., that foundations might be little more than tax-avoidance schemes, and the Revenue Act of 1950 forbade unreasonable amassing of foundation income, so the stuff had to be spent. At the time Ford’s will was executed, it was thought that the yearly expenditure would be around twenty million dollars, but, three years later, it leaped to thirty-eight million, then, a few years after that, sixty-eight million. The problem of how to give so much money away, with no obligations whatsoever, was more troublesome than it sounded. “The first thing you have to do every year is get rid of most of your income in a few very big operations,” a Ford vice-president told Dwight Macdonald in this magazine, in 1955. “Then you’re down to Rockefeller size—around twenty million a year—and you can begin to act like a foundation instead of like the United States Treasury.” The splash made by the foundation was such that shoots of hope sprang up all over the world. Ford received proposals for irrigating the Sahara, for planting a three-mile-wide strip of flowers along the U.S.-Canadian border, and for forcibly melting the ice cap at the South Pole.

It was clear that the newly vast foundation needed to expand its mission far outside Detroit, so Henry Ford II appointed a committee to determine what that mission should be. For more than a year, members of the committee flew all over the place, seeking advice from the great and the good, and in 1949 they produced a lengthy report. The committee’s ambitions were limitless. “At one time the gifts of individuals and benevolent organizations were intended largely to relieve the suffering of ‘the weak, the poor and the unfortunate,’” the report noted. “With the establishment of the modern foundation a much greater concept came into being. The aim is no longer merely



to treat symptoms . . . but rather to eradicate the causes of suffering. Nor is the modern foundation content to concern itself only with man's obvious physical needs; it seeks rather to help man achieve his entire well-being—to satisfy his mental, emotional, and spiritual needs as well."

In order to achieve these grand aims, the committee concluded, it was necessary above all to attain a better understanding of man himself—"what he needs and wants, what incentives are necessary to his productive and socially useful life, what factors influence his development and behavior, how he learns and communicates with other persons, and, finally, what prevents him from living at peace with himself and his fellow men." The committee had a deep faith that research by top people was the key: if only there were more objective data, it was felt, then many disputes that appeared to be politically intractable would be resolved.

For its first president in this new era, the foundation selected Paul Hoffman, the chairman of Studebaker-Packard and freshly glorious from his successful administration of the Marshall Plan, and began opening offices on several continents. It commissioned and moved into its splendid pink granite-and-steel headquarters, designed in the International Style, on East Forty-third Street, near the U.N. The building contained a garden: a third of an acre, twelve stories high, air-conditioned, and planted with magnolia trees and eucalyptus trees and evergreen pear trees, in addition to dozens of bushes, vines, and flowering plants that would vary with the seasons. The clear glass that made up the south façade both enabled the foliage to flourish and gave the building what the architect felt was a moral structure.

Ford saw itself as the "research and development arm of society," funding projects that were still too experimental or politically dubious to be taken on by governments, but which, if they proved successful, might be more widely adopted. In its first decades, it was attacked by both the left and the right. The left thought that it was propping up the status quo, and was probably a front for the C.I.A. to boot (and, in fact, the C.I.A. was using other foundations for covert funding). The right

was convinced that it was staffed by a bunch of dangerous Communists who were out to annihilate the free-enterprise system. "We will have to start watching these outfits in this strange new development in our affairs lest they use the power of enormous tax-free pools of money to destroy the liberties of the American people," the anti-New Deal columnist Westbrook Pegler declared in 1952. Some said that if you bought a Ford car you were contributing to the Communists. The rumors of Communist conspiracy got so bad that in the nineteen-fifties there were two congressional investigations of foundations and their purported dedication to undermining the American way of life.

Partly because of this suspicion, and partly because the founders were as conservative as their critics, most foundations' grants in the early days were not particularly controversial. Rockefeller eliminated hookworm from the rural American South and revolutionized American medical education. Ford gave

enormous sums to America's universities and later funded Head Start. But, starting in the mid-fifties, Ford grew bold. It funded the N.A.A.C.P.'s work on *Brown v. Board of Education*. It was a time in which "urban renewal" and Robert Moses-style projects were pushing low-income people out of their homes, and black people from the South were moving into white neighborhoods in Northern cities; Ford moved into inner cities, financing community-based organizations that provided social services, and tried to improve local schools. To the left, it now looked like Ford was trying to put a conciliatory face on what was still basically the same urban-renewal program, fostering the interests of developers and excluding activists, particularly black activists, from participation in decision-making. To the right, it looked like Ford was fomenting urban rebellion.

When McGeorge Bundy, who had been the national-security adviser to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, was appointed president of the foundation,



*"I'm trying to decide between water and sunlight."*



AN UBER CAR NAMED DESIRE

in 1966, he took even bolder steps, financing trade unions and neighborhood activism. Ford gave millions of dollars to civil-rights groups, and funded the Congress of Racial Equality. Most controversial of all, it funded activists who wanted to take control of their school district, in Brooklyn, in order to be able to fire tenured, unionized teachers. This, too, was largely a racial issue, setting mostly black parents and leaders from the Black Power movement against mostly white teachers. The conflict launched the city's largest-ever teachers' strike; police barricades and helicopters kept the teachers apart from the activists, some of whom were armed. Once again, this intervention managed to alienate people of all political stripes: liberals and conservatives decried the racial hostility created by the strike—hostility that poisoned the city for decades. The left, having previously accused Ford of excluding activists from its grants, now accused it of trying to co-opt and de-

radicalize activists by giving them cash.

Ford did not have another president as confrontational as Bundy. But, even so, it was peculiar how, in the decades that followed the New York City teachers' strike, resistance to foundations, for the most part, melted away. By the time Walker arrived at Ford, the dispensing of money for charitable purposes, even very large sums of money, was generally thought to be at best a generous and at worst an innocuous activity. This was not because foundations had stopped funding big, controversial projects. The Gates Foundation, which had displaced Ford as the largest foundation in the world—its endowment was forty billion dollars to Ford's twelve—spent around two billion dollars over eight years in an effort to break up big public high schools and form smaller ones—an effort that resulted in around twenty-five hundred schools in forty-five states. (It later decided that the small schools made little difference and dropped the program.) It spent millions

more on creating charter schools. The education scholar Diane Ravitch, outraged by what she saw as a serious undermining of the public-school system, called Gates the nation's unelected school superintendent.

Because foundations tended to fund liberal causes, conservatives were still a little suspicious of them, but outright opposition had been rare since fears of Communism died down—perhaps because conservatives tended to believe that a person ought to be able to spend his money as he chose, and if he chose to spend it on charity rather than on yachts, well, who was to fault him for it? Because foundations tended to fund liberal causes, they were regarded benignly by most liberals, when they were regarded at all. But this liberal approval was odd, because, as Rob Reich, a political scientist at Stanford, pointed out in the *Boston Review*, foundations were undeniably plutocratic: they were vehicles for the rich to mold society into the shape they thought it ought to be. In this, foundations resembled super PACs: in both cases, money gave rich people the means to exercise an outsized and undemocratic influence on American life. Although foundations were not allowed to fund overtly political activity (which prevented them from addressing the root causes of the conditions they were permitted to alleviate), it was difficult to see why attempting to change American society by lobbying was political while doing the same by funding activists was not. "Why are we . . . hypersensitive to the dangers of big money in politics . . . but blind, it seems, to the dangers of big philanthropy in the public sphere?" Gara LaMarche, formerly of George Soros's Open Society Institute, wondered in an article in *Democracy*.

But there was a significant difference between foundations and super PACs: the money that endowed foundations was exempt from taxation, so when foundations attempted to mold society they were doing so at the expense of the taxpayer. When a rich person endowed a foundation, he received, in effect, something like a forty-percent subsidy from the government, and in 2012 U.S. foundation assets amounted to more than seven hundred billion dollars. (Of course, the same could be said



of any charitable donation given by a person who itemized his tax deductions: in 2013, tax revenue forgone owing to charitable giving amounted to nearly forty billion dollars.) Even the conservative legal theorist Judge Richard Posner could not understand why foundation assets should be tax-exempt. “A perpetual charitable foundation . . . is a completely irresponsible institution, answerable to nobody,” he wrote. “Unlike a hereditary monarch whom such a foundation otherwise resembles, it is subject to no political controls either. . . . The puzzle for economics is why these foundations are not total scandals.”

In fact, a hundred years ago, at the dawn of the foundation era, they *were* total scandals. When John D. Rockefeller tried to obtain a federal charter to establish his foundation, in 1910, Congress rejected him. In 1915, a Commission on Industrial Relations recommended that the Rockefeller Foundation be regulated by the government, or be shut down altogether by Congress, and its funds distributed to the unemployed, since presumably the reason it had all that surplus money was that the Rockefellers had been too cheap in paying their workers. “The domination by men in whose hands the final control of a large part of American industry rests is not limited to their employees, but is being rapidly extended to control the education and ‘social service’ of the nation,” the commission warned. The puzzle for history was why the scandal went away.

Walker took a night flight from Newark to Delhi, fourteen hours. He took Ambien on the plane and slept. After he got to his hotel, at ten o’clock at night Delhi time but early morning in New York, he had a late dinner in a kind of bizarre disco bar he discovered off the hotel lobby—he realized that probably it wasn’t quite as bizarre as it seemed to him then, in his twilight state—and sat up e-mailing the office until two in the morning. He knew that, because he was president, if he got behind on his e-mails then many people would be held up in their work, waiting for him. On the other hand, he had learned from his executive coach that it was also possible to get too far ahead on his e-mails,

as he had done when he first got the job, firing off dozens of enthusiastic queries and thoughts and suggestions on Saturday afternoons and Sunday mornings, when other people were trying to enjoy their weekends.

He himself was uninterested in leisure. He worked every weekend, and he was out every night attending two, three, four, five events—panel discussions, parties, talks, dinners, galas—leaving one with an apology and a smile, leaping into a taxi, on to the next. But he had discovered that his staff needed time off from work, and became distressed and resentful when this time off was denied them, and that when he sent them an e-mail about something on his mind they felt obliged to respond quickly, and this was interfering with their ability to get properly rested before the new week began. Early on, he had talked excitedly in a meeting about some idea that had occurred to him, and then had been startled to find, a week or so later, a detailed report on his desk exploring the idea from several angles—a report that had undoubtedly taken someone, perhaps several someones, many days to produce. He realized then that his employees wished to please him and anticipate his wants, and that therefore a president should not be too spontaneous or promiscuous in his enthusiasms.

The most important thing he had to do on this trip to India was pay his



respects to a representative of the new Narendra Modi administration. It was particularly important now to establish friendly relations, because Indian politicians had been frustrated by N.G.O. activism for some time, and, since many N.G.O.s received foreign funding, including from Ford, the politicians objected to what looked like foreign interference in domestic affairs. Efforts to build a nuclear power plant in South India, for instance, had been delayed

for years by protests, for which the government blamed foreign-funded activists and Christians. It was suspected that safety concerns about the plant were merely window dressing to disguise the real motive behind the protests, which was to insure that India remained dependent on foreign investment. India was a nuclear power and a middle-income country that should rightly be an aid donor, the government felt—not a recipient.

In April, the government froze the bank accounts of Greenpeace India, and in the same month cancelled the registration of nearly nine thousand N.G.O.s that received money from abroad. Then, in May, it announced that, in the interests of national security, Ford would henceforth be required to seek government permission for all of its grants. Since Ford was already required to seek government permission for all of its grants, the message was clear: Ford must be more careful or be shut down like Greenpeace. It was widely supposed that this was payback for Ford’s support, some years earlier, for Gujarat activists who had brought charges against Narendra Modi—then Gujarat’s Hindu-nationalist chief minister—for “enabling” ethnic riots in 2002 that killed around a thousand people, mostly Muslims.

Walker spent a long time talking with government officials, trying to dispel their suspicion. But, he realized, it certainly was a delicate question, what Ford thought it was doing, funding attempts to undermine centuries-old customs in foreign countries. What if some foreign country tried to do that in America? Walker hoped to persuade Indian philanthropists to take an interest in governance and human-rights groups, but, since such groups were often run by people who were given to proclaiming their hatred and contempt for corporate India, it was difficult to persuade corporate India to fund them.

This strained relationship between the foundation and India’s government was relatively new. Ford had been invited to set up shop in the country by India’s first post-independence Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, in 1952. Nehru gave Ford an extraordinary site to build on, in the Lodi Gardens, right in the center of New Delhi, amid trees

and lawns, and mosques and tombs from before the Mughal period. Ford built a grand campus and moved in in style: in the sixties, there were several hundred employees in the Delhi office. In addition to the staff, foreign experts were always arriving to serve as consultants, and a guest house was built to accommodate them, next to the swimming pool. The office kept two jet airplanes on hand to transport staff, and Douglas Ensminger, the head of the office, used to drive around town in a horse-drawn carriage, like a viceroy.

Ensminger was close to Nehru, and in the early days Ford funded mostly government projects. It financed grand institutes of management, of public administration, and of design. It trained hundreds of workers who ventured out to hundreds of villages all over the country to teach modern agricultural methods, public health, and techniques of political organization. Along with the Rockefeller Foundation, it financed the Green Revolution, which, by introduc-

ing new seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, and methods, enormously increased India's agricultural production at a time of terrible food shortages—India doubled its rice output in six years. Not everything worked so well: responding to government concerns about overpopulation, Ford funded research that led indirectly to a forced-sterilization program in the mid-seventies that unintentionally killed close to two thousand people owing to botched surgeries. Even the Green Revolution had unintended side effects, bankrupting small farmers and reducing biodiversity.

Then, in the eighties, Ford began to shift its focus from academic institutes and economic development to social justice, and from financing government programs to funding N.G.O.s. This was not just a shift in the Delhi office: in 1979, a new Ford president, Franklin Thomas, had taken over in New York. Thomas had come out of community development and poverty work in Brooklyn, and he was less in-

terested in the sort of magisterial institution building that Ford had been doing in India and more interested in civil society.

Many on the Indian left who ran those N.G.O.s had long been suspicious of Ford. It suspected that the foundation was a front for the C.I.A., using civil-society groups to mold India according to an imperialist American agenda. But, more recently, some had come around. They saw that Ford had financed activists, in India and elsewhere, with unimpeachably antiestablishment politics. And they saw that there were genuine activists even among Ford's staff, such as Vanita Mukherjee, the program officer for Gender, Sexuality and Reproductive Justice, who had spent many years working as a penniless organizer of fishermen in Kerala.

In addition to meetings with activists and grantees in Delhi, Walker was scheduled to visit some village projects that Ford had been funding. He and a delegation from the Delhi office flew to Ranchi, the capital of the state of Jharkhand. Jharkhand was part of the "tribal belt" in the east of the country. Tribals were outsiders in India: they weren't even traditionally Hindus; they existed outside the caste system altogether. In recent years, they had won some control over their land, but the tribal population was still one of the poorest in the country.

The first day in Jharkhand, Walker and the delegation were driven in a convoy far out of Ranchi to a village, accompanied by workers from Pradan, a Ford-funded N.G.O. Before Pradan arrived, seventeen years earlier, life in the village had been very difficult. Each year for five or six months, there was nothing to eat, because the crops were all gone; the villagers managed to buy a little food only by foraging firewood and walking for miles to sell it in the town. Armed Maoists roamed about. Pradan taught the villagers how to conserve water and irrigate through a network of pipes so they could grow two crops each year rather than one. It taught them to plant a diversity of crops—wheat, lentils, vegetables—and yields improved. It suggested investing in mango trees, and the mangoes sold for



*"Do we even have a garbage disposal?"*

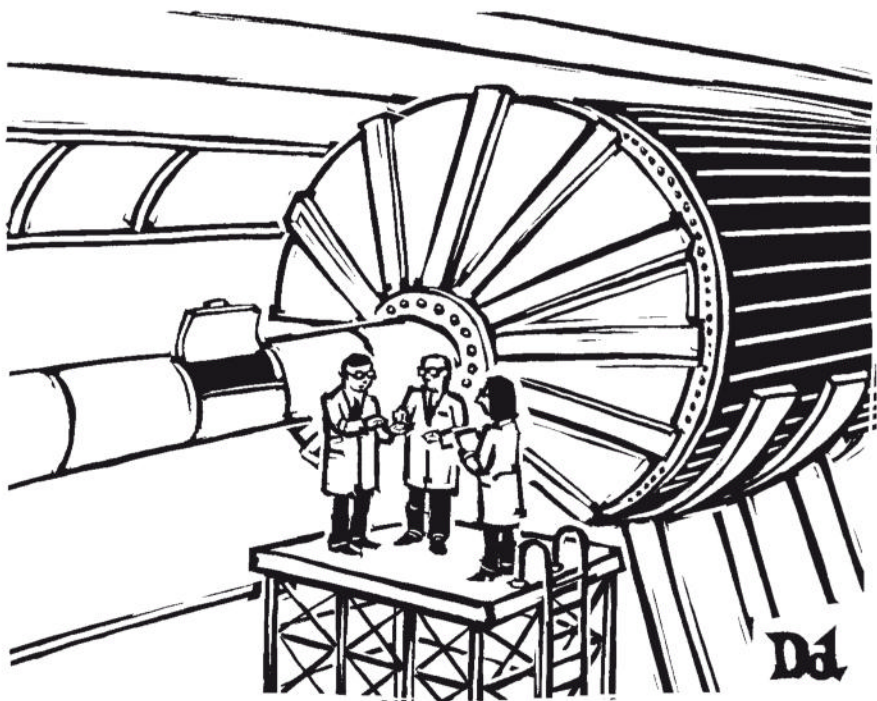


a lot of money. It informed the villagers what government schemes they were entitled to, and helped them to collect what they were owed. The local Maoists disagreed about N.G.O.s like Pradan: some felt that they were doing good work for the people; others felt that by ameliorating conditions in a superficial manner they were delaying the revolution.

Pradan had been co-founded thirty years before by Deep Joshi, who was then a program officer at Ford's Delhi office with an engineering degree from M.I.T. In the mid-nineteen-seventies, Joshi had come across a couple of Johns Hopkins-trained doctors who'd set up a clinic in a remote village. They had educated local workers in sanitation, hygiene, and hydration, and had raised health standards in the village to levels that wouldn't be seen in most of India for decades. He thought, If only more professionals—engineers, doctors, agricultural experts, plant biologists—could be persuaded to work in rural areas, then India would really change. Most people thought this was a crazy notion: what engineer or doctor was going to move to the middle of nowhere on a tiny salary when he could be living a comfortable life in the city? And what Indian parent would permit his expensively educated child to commit such folly? But Ford gave Joshi a grant to try out his idea, and now Pradan recruited graduates from top universities, just as corporations did, albeit not quite as many.

Because Joshi and his co-founder were engineers, at first they were focussed on hardware—irrigation pipes, agricultural equipment. But gradually they realized that persuading people to collaborate with one another was equally crucial to prosperity. Organizing women into groups enabled them to apply for proper credit without becoming slaves to moneylenders, and also emboldened them to take action against local malefactors—schoolteachers who didn't show up, fathers who didn't allow daughters to inherit land, husbands who beat their wives.

The convoy stopped at the edge of the village, and Walker emerged from the car's air-conditioning into the sun. There, waiting to greet him, was a large crowd—practically the entire village.



*"The atoms are burned on the outside but still ice-cold in the middle."*

There was a group of women in matching red-and-white saris with white flowers in their hair, and more flowers in metal pots on their heads. Somebody hung an extraordinary garland, a kind of lei constructed entirely of vegetables, around Walker's neck, which was a little scratchy but smelled deliciously planty and fresh. The sun on his face dimmed, and, looking up, he saw that a woman had come up behind him to hold over his head a giant sunshade of draped blue-and-silver cloth, like those used by maharajas riding on elephants. He was told to process downhill the few dozen yards from the car to the community center, where a presentation would take place.

A man headed the procession, beating time on a drum, leading the crowd along a path through the center of the village, while to Walker's left and to his right the women in the matching saris formed two lines and started to dance to the rhythm of the drumbeats, waving leafy branches and singing for him. The woman carrying the sunshade walked behind him; in front of him, a photographer walked backward, snapping his photograph. It was a little embarrassing, this maharaja treatment, but

what was he to do? It was the nature of the situation. The president of the Ford Foundation had come for a visit! Besides, it was only a little bit embarrassing; it was also fun. His job was to look happy and appreciative, and he did; he turned from side to side, beaming, putting his palms together in a gesture of greeting and thanks. Suddenly a large goat appeared, darted toward him, and snatched a couple of beans out of his garland in its teeth before it was shooed away; he was startled but then delighted—it was all part of the fun, and an excellent addition to the story he would tell later.

The procession came to a halt facing the village's prized amenity: two brand-new public toilets, housed in a hut painted yellow and green. The drummer stopped, the singers fell silent. Walker was asked to officially open the toilets, which he did, improvising a gesture, joyful but not overly demonstrative—how did one open a toilet? This was the sort of thing the president of the Ford Foundation must be able to do without briefing. His gesture was a success: everyone applauded. The drumbeats resumed, the singing started up again, and the procession carried on. ♦

## WAR OF WORDS

*A woman's battle to end stoning and juvenile execution in Iran.*

BY LAURA SECOR

In the Mazandaran province of northern Iran, where the Elburz Mountains careen toward the Caspian Sea, Asieh Amini grew up on a farm surrounded by kiwi and tangerine orchards. Born in 1974, Amini was the third of four sisters. When she was very young, her family, which came from the gentry of feudal times, owned animals and employed gardeners and housekeepers. Amini understood that her great-grandmother was an important person because everyone, including Amini's father, had to sit up straight when she entered a room. In the north of Iran, women could own property, wield social power, and work on farms with their sleeves and their pants rolled up. But it was still common for men to have multiple wives, and because of this Amini's extended family sprawled. Amini's father was a teacher. Though he was a religious man, he wore his faith lightly.

Amini was five in 1979, when revolution came. The monarchy fell; an Islamic Republic replaced it, with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as its leader, and for a decade Iran convulsed with violence and privation. First came internal conflict over the revolution's spoils, and then an enormously costly war with Iraq. The Aminis, no longer able to afford the animals or the gardeners or the farmworkers in straitened times, became middle-class.

Amini and her sisters spun themselves a cocoon of nature and literature. When they weren't playing outdoors, they read, wrote stories, and painted. Amini and the second-oldest sister spent Thursday afternoons at a poetry circle that met at a nearby public library. It was Amini's first taste of literary life, and she loved it. She imagined that she would one day be a painter and a writer.

Amini was largely shielded from the tribulations of her country, but there were some things that she would always remember. She was not allowed

to wear white shoes or short socks at school. She thought the required dark hijab ugly, and she cried when she had to put it on, but her mother gently explained that this was a rule no one could disobey. Young men returned from the Iraqi front without limbs; many did not return at all. Within Amini's extended family, some supported the new regime and some opposed it. There were young relatives in prison, and older relatives who thought that they belonged there. And then there were the three sons of Amini's maternal aunt.

The brothers lived in Tehran and had been briefly imprisoned for taking part in revolutionary activities under the Shah. Just before the monarchy fell, they came to stay near Amini's family, among relatives who were not engaged in political fights. The oldest of those brothers came to the Aminis' house, which streamed with visitors eager to hear the news from Tehran. He died in a car accident not long before the revolution.

The boys' father, Ayatollah Mohammad Mohammadi Gilani, became the Islamic Republic's chief justice. He presided over the courts during a period when they ordered the execution of thousands of opposition members. Gilani held that Iran's body politic needed to be cleansed of toxins. As it happened, his remaining two sons were members of the Mujahideen-e Khalq, a leftist Islamic militant group that had been part of the revolutionary movement but which came to oppose clerical rule. By 1981, the group had been declared illegal. Gilani was a man of terrible integrity. He insisted that, before the law, he could not hold his two sons to a different standard from that applied to other people. He was alleged to have signed an order for their execution. If the boys straightened out ideologically, Gilani reportedly said, he could guarantee their safety. But they didn't. They

went into hiding and died, Amini heard, trying to evade capture.

The judge's decision, which was reported in the official press, became notorious. To many Iranians, the name of Ayatollah Mohammad Mohammadi Gilani was synonymous with an era when the Islamic Republic executed its own children. But within Amini's family no one dared to speak of the matter. Not even the boys' mother mourned them. Before Amini became a teenager, she had glimpsed a void at the core of the Iranian justice system.

In 1993, Amini went to Allameh Tabataba'i University, in Tehran, to study journalism. She brought with her a restless enthusiasm and an indefatigable drive. She was only a freshman when she started writing for state-controlled newspapers. Her first assignments were for a supplement to the hard-line daily *Kayhan*. Those assignments led to a job at a larger paper, *Iran*, which was less strident. Amini felt lucky to be there. She did not much like the strict women's dress code, but she was there to excel, not to wage futile battles. When a colleague was assigned to interview a poet Amini admired, he took her along. The poet invited Amini to join a writers' circle. Already, she was living the life that she'd dreamed of as a child.

*Iran* started a youth supplement, and Amini's boss made her its cultural editor. Because men dominated Iranian newspapers, this was a bold appointment. Amini was responsible for twenty-eight pages. She supervised men who were older than she was, and they resented reporting to her. The paper's editor-in-chief scrutinized her every move. She put her head down and worked harder. Her days were often fourteen hours long.

One day, Amini recalls, a young male colleague pulled her aside. He looked





*In 2002, Iran's chief justice declared a moratorium on stoning, but the journalist Asieh Amini proved that the punishment continued.*

miserable, and he implored her to leave her job.

"Why?" she demanded.

The young man seemed to be fighting back tears. Every day, he told her, their colleagues spoke ill of her. They didn't like for a young, single girl to be an editor.

"That may be true," Amini replied. "But it's their problem, not mine."

Amini thought of politics as the pursuit of power, and so she often said that politics did not interest her at all. But, as a poet and a journalist in a closed society, she would find politics always just beneath her fingertips, like a bannister that ran alongside the steep staircase she climbed. When she'd moved to Tehran, there was not yet a term in common parlance for the space she occupied, but she came to understand it as "civil society."

In 1997, Mohammad Khatami won Iran's Presidency on the promise to expand that space. To that end, he presided over an unprecedented relaxation of censorship. Daring new publications emerged, and more young women entered journalism.

Amini was no longer working at *Iran*, and a former colleague persuaded her to take a job at a paper called *Zan*, which covered women's affairs. Amini saw no utility in segregating news by gender;

she rather opposed the idea. But she needed the work, and the paper hired her to cover the managerial side of sports.

It was at *Zan* that she met a photo-journalist named Javad Montazeri. Like Amini, he came from Mazandaran province. He had taken photographs of such sensitive subjects as the funerals of secular writers who had been assassinated by security agents. For eight months, Amini and Montazeri saw each other every day as friends. Then they decided to get married.

The hard-line clerics opposed Khatami's embrace of the press, and they shut down newspapers as swiftly as they opened. *Zan* was banned on Montazeri and Amini's wedding day. But Amini wasn't out of work for long. She took freelance assignments covering demonstrations in Kurdistan and an earthquake in Shiraz. After security forces raided a Tehran University dormitory, one summer night in 1999, she and Montazeri were among the first reporters to enter the campus. Montazeri photographed a dorm room that lay in cinders; only the radiator and the metal bed frames remained intact. A student in a ruined corridor showed the camera his back, which was hatched with red welts.

The dormitory attack, which had followed a student protest against press censorship, touched off several more days of demonstrations. When the news-

paper *Khordad* ran Montazeri's pictures on its front page and featured two pages of photographs inside, the demonstrating students held copies of the issue aloft like protest placards.

Five days after the dormitory attack, hard-liners held a counterdemonstration. Amini and Montazeri stopped at a phone booth so that she could call her editor. While she was talking, several large men in white shirts and kaffiyehs approached Montazeri and began leading him away. When she demanded to know where the men were taking him, they grabbed her, too.

The men took the couple to the back of a dress shop. One of them pointed a gun at Amini and began interrogating Montazeri about the publisher of *Khordad*, who was a close associate of Khatami's. Amini explained that she and Montazeri were journalists. "We don't make decisions about the system," she said. "Your problem is with the system."

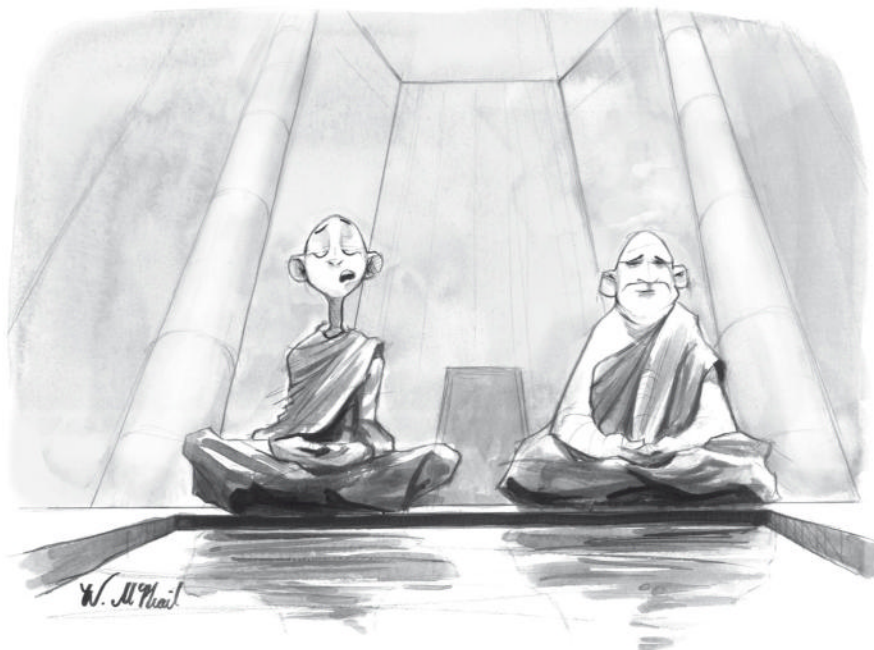
In that case, the man said, Amini could as easily work for the hard-line press as for the reformists. Would she come over to the other side? Amini, trying to sound natural, promised to think about it.

For days afterward, phone calls came. "We know everything about you," the caller said. "Just think about how you can work with us."

Amini was frightened. She wrote a letter to Khatami, asking for his help, and she gave it to the publisher of *Khordad*. The calls stopped, but Montazeri began waking in the middle of the night, crying and shaking. They started to talk about leaving Tehran.

Amini was six months into a new newspaper job when she learned that she was pregnant. Her life was already overfull. When she wasn't working at the paper, she painted, wrote poetry, or played the tanbur, a traditional long-necked lute. She wasn't ready to be a mother. Only after deep thought and searching talks with Montazeri did she resolve to see the pregnancy through.

But pregnancy outraged her. To begin with, it wasn't fair: Montazeri went about his life and his work just as before, while Amini's body grew cumbersome and volatile. But she would not slow down. She would prove to herself and her colleagues



"This is why we can't have nice things."



that she could accomplish as much as before. One day, she was out in the street for sixteen hours, covering a police roundup of homeless people. About a week later, she started leaking amniotic fluid. Her doctor ordered bed rest for the final months of her pregnancy.

Amini cried every day. And she was not much better after she gave birth to a daughter, Ava. During her final trimester, the judiciary had shut down both Montazeri's newspaper and hers. Montazeri found work again, but Amini was tied down, sleep deprived, and uninterested in the things she used to do. She cared for Ava and felt that the rest of her life was finished.

Ava was a year old when Montazeri came home from work one day and asked his wife, "Do we have a cup of tea?"

"No," Amini said.

"Is there anything to eat?"

"No," Amini said.

"What did you do today?"

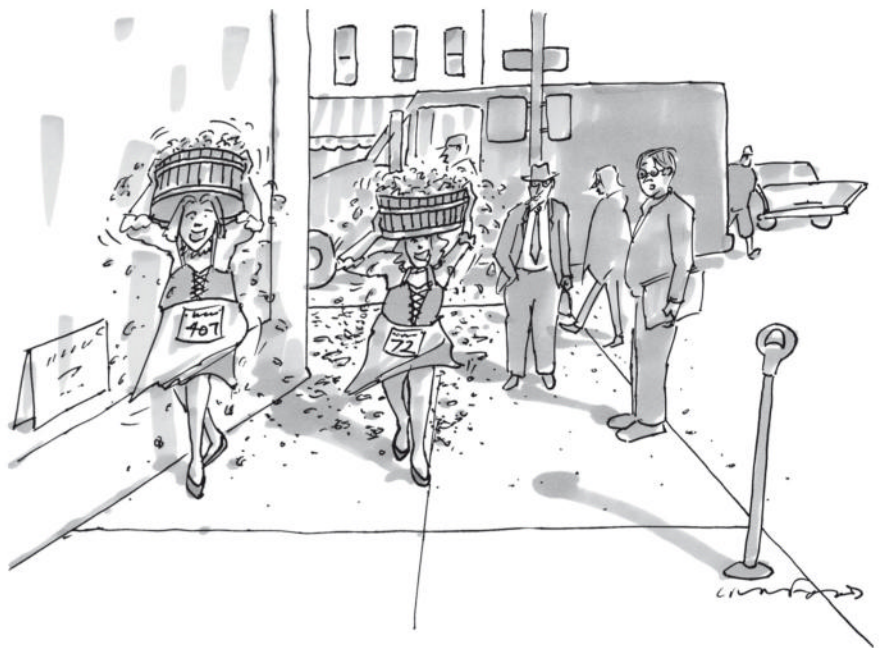
"Nothing," Amini said. "I just took care of the baby."

"I thought I married a person who was a poet and a journalist," Montazeri said. "I didn't know I married a housewife like you."

The next morning, she started looking for a babysitter and a job.

Soon Amini had not one job but two. From eight-thirty until four, when it was time to pick up Ava at school, she worked as the social editor of a daily newspaper called *Etemaad*. At night, when Ava slept, she managed a Web site called Women in Iran. She resumed travelling for her reporting, leaving Ava with family members. In Bam, in southern Iran, she covered an earthquake, and she went to Iraqi Kurdistan, in early 2003, to cover the buildup to the American-led invasion of Iraq.

When she returned to Tehran, she learned that she was pregnant again. She could not imagine carrying another baby to term. But abortion was illegal in Iran, unless the mother's life was in danger. She had two options. One was to find a doctor who was willing to perform the surgery in secret. The other was to take medicine that would damage the fetus and cause extensive bleeding. At that point, an emergency-room doctor would be obliged to perform a dilation and curettage.



*"Is the German-potato-salad marathon normally this messy?"*

With Montazeri's support, Amini chose the second option. There was no way to proceed but blindly. The medicine, which she bought on the black market, came as an injection. She would never know what the syringe contained.

She passed the night in terrible pain, but there was no blood. Nobody at a hospital would evacuate her uterus if she wasn't bleeding. So she injected herself a second time. Again the pain overwhelmed her. A friend told her to walk or run to bring on contractions. Amini did, continuously. But still the blood didn't come. She suspected that she'd harmed the fetus irreparably. She had no choice now but the illegal surgery, whatever its price.

The abortion doctor was very old, and Amini believed that he was a drug addict. His office was filthy. He told Amini that, in addition to the steep fee she would owe him, she would have to pay an anesthesiologist and a nurse, whom he would hire. She agreed. On the day of her procedure, the anesthesiologist showed up with a vividly yellow face—from drink, Amini imagined. The nurse wore towering heels and heavy makeup. Montazeri asked Amini repeatedly if she was sure that she wanted to proceed. She didn't see that she had any other choice.

In the days that followed, she bled and bled, and her body shook. She could not seek medical care or advice, and she could not tell anyone other than her husband what she had done. She called in sick and took a few days off. Then she returned to life as she had known it.

In the summer of 2004, a news item from the town of Neka, in Mazandaran, brought Amini up short. A sixteen-year-old girl named Atefeh Sahaaleh had been executed for "acts incompatible with chastity." Official government sources gave Sahaaleh's age as twenty-two. Amini was struck by the discrepancy, and disturbed that a young girl had been hanged at all. She went to Neka to find out more.

On the streets, men told Amini that Sahaaleh was not a good girl. She had sold her body, one man explained; a lady like Amini shouldn't pursue such a story. Amini wheeled on him. Could he really speak of killing a girl in the name of respecting her body? And who was he to tell Amini what she should do? Another man told Amini that Sahaaleh had a psychological disorder.

Amini wandered until she found a small wooden gate that stood open. Over it hung black banners and placards of mourning. She thought that it might

belong to Sahaaleh's family. The house was a new construction, but it was unfinished. A young man lay, motionless, in the courtyard, his eyes half-lidded and rolled back, drool collecting on his chin, flies swarming his face.

"Sir?" Amini called out. "Are you O.K.?"

Just then, a muscle-bound young man approached her from behind. Who was she? he demanded.

"I'm a journalist," she replied.

"You came too late," the young man, who turned out to be Sahaaleh's cousin, said. "We lost her."

In the weeks that followed, Amini located more of the girl's relatives and pieced together her story. Sahaaleh was five when her mother left her father for another man, then died in a car accident. The father, heartbroken, resorted to drugs and neglected his children. One of Sahaaleh's brothers drowned in a river. Another became a drug addict. At the age of eight, Sahaaleh went to live with her grandparents, who were too old and poor to care for her.

When she was nine, a neighbor raped her. He paid her for her silence. Then he came back. He also brought other men to her. She was repeatedly raped, and given money to tell no one. She survived on that money. When she was thirteen, Iran's morality police arrested her. A local judge sentenced her to a hundred lashes—the official punishment for sex outside marriage. Under the Iranian penal code, a woman could be sentenced to a hundred lashes three times. On the fourth arrest, she would be executed.

Amini had not known about these laws. She lived in a world where they were never applied. Among middle-class urbanites, it was normal to have sex outside marriage. Why should anyone be hanged for something so common? Why, especially, a sixteen-year-old girl whose childhood had been lost to the neglect, depravity, and violence of others? Sahaaleh had definitely been sixteen: Amini saw the girl's birth certificate. International law forbade the execution of anyone younger than eighteen, regardless of the fact that the Iranian penal

code made the age of criminal responsibility nine for girls and fifteen for boys. Moreover, so far as Amini could ascertain, Sahaaleh had been arrested only twice, not three times, before being sentenced to death.

No story had ever seized Amini like this one. Sahaaleh was an alter ego, a daughter Amini might have had if she had not grown up in a world of relative privilege and safety. Even years later, Amini spoke of Sahaaleh by her first name, as if they had been intimate friends. Sahaaleh changed her life.

Back in Tehran, Amini went over the notes and the documents that she'd gathered: interviews with the father and aunts; report cards

from the brief time Sahaaleh spent in school. But Amini couldn't write and she couldn't sleep. Every time she tried to get the story down, she cried until morning. When at last she pulled the report together, her newspaper wouldn't publish it.

"Why not?" Amini asked. "I have all the documents."

As Amini recalls it, her editor-in-chief told her that she was fighting with Sharia law and with the judiciary. The newspaper couldn't do that.

Amini sent the report to another newspaper, which also declined it. Finally, a women's publication agreed to publish an edited version.

A few weeks after the story about Sahaaleh was published, Amini heard of another girl who was to be hanged. The execution was to take place in Arak, a city southwest of Tehran, and the girl was Leyla, a nineteen-year-old with a mental age of eight. She, too, had been sentenced to death on account of offenses against chastity. And she, too, was a victim of child rape. Amini rushed to Arak, and was relieved to discover that Leyla was still alive and in prison.

Leyla had been a child—some sources said eight, others five—when her mother first prostituted her, to a sixty-year-old man. From then on, her mother prostituted her every day, living off the money. Leyla gave birth for the first time at the age of nine, and received her first hundred lashes. She had twins,

and received another hundred lashes, at fourteen. By the time she was sentenced to death—for incest, among other things, because her brothers were among the many townsmen who had raped her—she could hardly talk or care for herself.

Amini went to the courthouse and found the judge who had sentenced Leyla to death. He sent everyone away so that he could speak privately with the journalist from Tehran. The law, he told Amini, was the law. It was his job simply to apply it. And the law looked darkly on Leyla, because her sexual availability was destructive to family life. Amini recalls the judge explaining that if society were an apple Leyla would be a worm.

Amini had arrived with a retainer form from the law office of a friend, a human-rights attorney named Shadi Sadr. More than anything, Amini wanted to visit Leyla in prison and get her signature on the form. Then Leyla would have a lawyer, and a fighting chance. Amini spent about an hour with the judge, interviewing him and arguing with him. She said that he should let her take Leyla away and remake her life. Then he could judge whether or not Leyla was good for society.

The judge scoffed, and told her to go see what she wanted to see. He wrote a note to the prison ordering the wardens to admit Amini as a visitor.

The wardens brought before Amini a tall, beautiful young woman who had the affect of a child, and looked on Amini in confusion.

Amini put her arms around Leyla and spoke quietly in her ear. "I am your sister," she said. "I want to help you. Your situation is not good. You have to trust me. And I promise you that I will help you."

She took out Sadr's retainer: "I just need you to sign this."

Leyla could not sign her name. And so, Amini recalls, she painted Leyla's finger with ink and stamped it on the signature line.

When a guard realized that Amini was not Leyla's lawyer, she exploded in anger and confiscated the retainer form. Amini was told to leave at once.

Sadr went to the prison and helped Leyla complete the form. Amini, meanwhile, published an account of Leyla's





case in the magazine *Zanan*, and her e-mail in-box lit up with messages from people wondering what they could do to help. Push for the girl's retrial and release, Amini replied.

Leyla's story became known internationally. Press accounts from Iranian journalists and Iranian bloggers living abroad ricocheted through human-rights organizations and the foreign media. When Norway's Prime Minister, Kjell Magne Bondevik, heard about Leyla's case, he wrote a letter to President Khatami, expressing concern.

Eventually, Leyla had a second trial, with a younger judge. Amini paced outside the courtroom door while the new judge deliberated. He emerged into the corridor and told her to relax: Leyla would receive ninety-nine lashes and then be freed. But Amini told him that she was worried. If Leyla were released into the custody of her family, she would likely be forced back into the sex trade, and then there would be nothing that Amini or anyone else could do for her.

The judge offered to have Leyla sent to Tehran as her punishment. How would Amini assist her then?

"Just do it," Amini said. And he did.

Amini and Sadr approached an organization for indigent young women, which took Leyla into its care and provided her with a psychologist and a private tutor. Leyla learned to read and write, and to pass the equivalent of fifth grade. Amini brought Leyla to her home as often as she could, so that she could play with Ava and experience family life. The psychologist told Amini that spending time with Montazeri was especially important for Leyla, as she had so little experience of normal interaction with men.

"You're like a mother to me," Leyla told Amini.

Amini sometimes filmed Leyla. She planned to edit clips together and send the footage to Leyla's first judge with a question: Was Leyla good for society now?

Amini was changing. She was still a newspaper editor, now supervising as many as sixteen pages of *Etemaad* daily, and she was still a poet. But she had become possessed by the stories of underage prisoners on death row and of impoverished young women

convicted of crimes against chastity. Colleagues reproved her. These were death-penalty cases—lost causes not worth her reportorial time. Amini knew only that she had work to do. If she, as a journalist, had not known about these laws or their enforcement, what might she owe to the better education of her seventy million countrymen?

Amini had never considered herself a feminist. She saw her activist work mainly within the frame of children's rights. But, as her work on death-penalty cases became better known, women's-rights activists pulled her increasingly into their orbit. When Shirin Ebadi, the Iranian human-rights lawyer known for defending dissidents, women, children, and refugees, won the Nobel Peace Prize, in 2003, women's-rights activists included Amini in a gathering to discuss what should be done to mark Ebadi's return from Stockholm with her prize.

The meeting impressed Amini with its breadth of representation. Some of the women were strict Muslims and Islamists; others were secular. The activists turned out an enormous crowd at the airport when Ebadi's flight touched down. They sang songs to celebrate her, but their gesture was also protective: Ebadi was unlikely to be harmed under such a glaring light. The group met regularly for the following year and a half. Its members came to a consensus that

the overarching issue facing Iranian women was the discriminatory nature of the law.

Toward the end of Khatami's Presidency, in the summer of 2005, the women's-rights activists organized a peaceful sit-in. Hundreds of demonstrators massed in front of Tehran University. Montazeri took photographs; Amini covered the story for a newspaper. It had been twenty years since a major demonstration for women's rights had taken place in Iran. The previous one had been to protest Ayatollah Khomeini's decree forcing women to wear the hijab.

To her surprise, Amini found that she cared very much who won the Presidential election in 2005. She wasn't expecting a miracle. She just wanted a government that left a few threads loose for her to tug. But to her dismay the hard-liner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad succeeded Khatami as President.

A chill descended almost immediately on the remaining reformist press. Ahmadinejad's intelligence minister announced that "civil society" was nothing short of a strategic tool of the enemy, by which he meant the United States. Amini cried when she heard the speech. Activists like her knew that this was how the security forces laid the groundwork for a sweep.

Unable to abide the heavy censorship of newspapers, Amini had gone to



*"Stop complaining. You've got the sun in the morning and me at night."*

Amini's source in Mashhad insisted that a judge there had imposed a ston-

Abbas H. and Mahboubeh M. were brought to the spot alive, wrapped in white cloth for burial. They were lowered into pits, but the one that had been

Amini and the others arrived at the cemetery. Amini's colleague stumbled from the car and vomited. The guardsman continued his story: he had not wanted to participate, but the judge called to him and told him to cast a stone. The guardsman protested that his job was to protect the crowd—he could not abandon his post. But what he really felt was something else. This judge, this cleric, was talking about God and the Prophet. And the guardsman, who was a deeply religious man, did not know what to do with such a God or such a Prophet.

Amini understood something that she hadn't grasped before. She and her friends in the women's-rights community had made discriminatory law the focus of their protest. But, even if they got the government to accept their demand for equality, they faced a deeper problem: Iran's most hard-line judges believed that they answered to an authority higher than the law of the land.

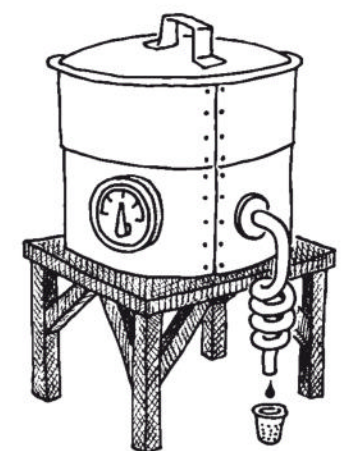
In October, 2006, Amini and Sadr started a campaign called Stop Stoning Forever. They joined forces with a well-known older feminist who had roots in the revolutionary movement,



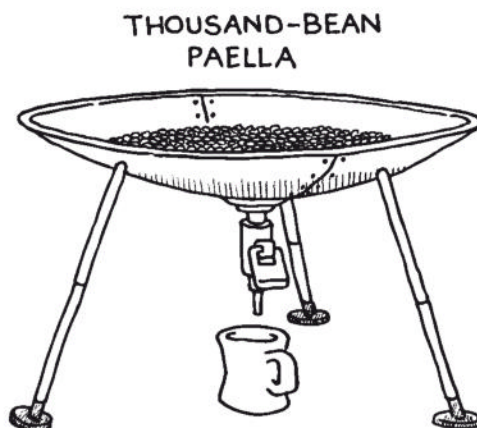
*"I feel like the only pole vaulter in here."*



## CAN I GET YOU ANOTHER COFFEE?

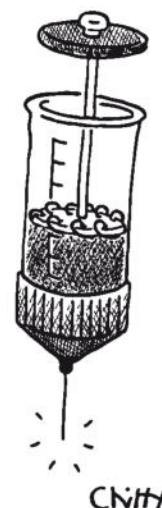


VON SCHOOGENHEIM'S  
THIMBLE



THOUSAND-BEAN  
PAELLA

THE FRENCH  
INJECTION



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• •

and with two women living abroad who could broadcast their findings without censorship. Amini's role was to collect evidence that stonings were continuing to take place.

Amini later remembered the campaign's early days as among the most meaningful of her life. Her once solitary work now had company and a larger purpose. At night, she and her fellow-organizers expended their anxiety and energy in giddy parties where they danced and sang. Once, the three women rented a van and took their children to Kelardasht, a lush valley in Mazandaran, for a working vacation.

The Iranian women's-rights movement was never so visible, or so embattled, as it was during the early Ahmadinejad period. Women staged sit-ins and protests for the right to attend soccer matches and for equality under the law. The security services replied with arrests and street violence. In August, 2006, women's-rights activists launched what they called the One Million Signatures campaign. They printed pamphlets detailing laws that discriminated against women, and distributed the pamphlets behind closed doors, collecting signatures for the repeal of those laws.

Stoning was not technically a women's issue: the sentence was levied at least as often on men. But adultery was, in the end, a women's issue. Men could legally have up to four wives and many

lovers. Women didn't have equal rights in initiating divorce, and they automatically lost custody of children over the age of seven if they did manage to leave their husbands. Amini and her partners in the campaign hoped to hold a system of discriminatory family law to the light by exposing the persistence of stoning.

Amini had a breakthrough when one of the campaign's members who lived abroad published an interview with her about the Mashhad stoning case. A source came forward and put Amini in touch with one of the victims' families, which gave Amini two documents. One was from the court, confirming the sentence. The other was a forensics report confirming the cause of death.

Amini published what she knew on her blog and in *Zanan*. It was a story that no newspaper dared to touch. The minister of justice gave a press conference and called the stoning story a lie. The state media spread rumors that the campaign took money from foreign countries and propagated fictions that served Western prejudices about Islamic law.

Amini canvassed the country from city to city, prison to prison. She spent only two weekends with her family in the summer of 2006. She and her fellow-organizers located fourteen people sentenced to be stoned,

and they tracked down their families and their lawyers. Sadr set up a network to help defendants who had no lawyers. When the activists couldn't publish news of the cases inside the country, they got word to foreign groups like Amnesty International, and the information boomeranged back into Iran.

Amini learned that a decade earlier in the city of Takestan, in Qazvin province, a man named Jafar Kiani and his alleged lover had been sentenced to stoning for adultery. The court was preparing only now to carry out the sentence. The campaign sprang into action, publicizing the case. Shahroudi intervened, Amini was told, and stayed the sentence; several days later, however, she heard that Kiani had been taken in secret to a mountain outside town, where he was stoned.

Amini went to the mountain, and a villager showed her the bloodied stones. She gathered them to bring to Tehran as evidence. She took photographs and videos and interviewed villagers. Then she stopped in the city of Qazvin to see an activist who had summoned her. That activist had an important document. Someone had surreptitiously taken a paper from the desk of the judge in Kiani's case and scanned it. The scan was on a CD. Amini was asked to read the document and then destroy the disk.

The document was a letter from the



*"What about the writers? Nobody ever blames the writers!"*

presiding judge to Shahrودي, explicitly defying the moratorium on stoning. No decree of Shahrودي's would stop him from issuing the sentence, he said. Islamic law was on his side. And he cited the text of a law that Amini had never seen before. The law granted judges discretion over stoning and the hundred-lashes punishment for crimes against chastity. Any judge who deemed these punishments justified could impose them independently of the system. Ayatollah Shahrودي might be the head of the judiciary, the Takestan judge concluded, but there was nothing that he could do in the case of Jafar Kiani.

Amini broke the CD, as she had been told, but she committed its contents to memory. She understood now that a profound battle was raging inside the judiciary. Although one article of Iran's constitution demanded that courts make decisions only in accordance with the laws of the state, another article stipulated that, if the state provided no relevant law, the judge should refer to "Islamic sources and credible fatwas." A growing number of fundamentalist judges did not accept Shahrودي's authority. And

Shahrودي had maintained a public silence, which, Amini felt, only aided his enemies.

In March, 2007, five women's-rights activists who had been arrested at a demonstration the previous year were scheduled to go on trial. Amini and other activists converged on the courthouse, for a silent sit-in, and they were immediately arrested. Along with thirty-two other women, Amini was taken to Vozara, the detention center in Tehran normally used by the morality police. The police holding them were women, and the activists saw an opportunity.

"We're here because of you, because of your daughters, your nieces," one of the activists told the policewomen. "You should support us."

Amini recalls that the police and the detainees erupted in discussion. Some of the policewomen confided that they supported the women's activism and regretted detaining them; others told the sympathizers to shut up. The conversation came to an end, however, when the detainees were transferred to prison.

Guards led Amini, blindfolded, into an interrogation room. By looking sharply downward, she could see that

her interrogator had a thick file in his hands. She thought that she saw print-outs from her blog. From his tone, and from the line of his questioning, she suspected that she wasn't supposed to be in prison just yet. The security forces had meant to keep her and other women's-rights activists under surveillance—to track their network and their activities and spring a trap later. But the sit-in outside the courtroom had provoked a swifter response, and now here she was.

Amini and most of the other prisoners were released five days after their arrest. Only two women remained behind bars: Amini's partners in the Stop Stoning Forever campaign. They were released later, on bail, and organizations that they ran were shut down. But the Stop Stoning Forever campaign continued, even though its members understood that they were being closely monitored.

Amini knew that her phones were tapped and her comings and goings watched. One day, a stranger dropped in on one of her neighbors. He said that he was researching an accident report for insurance purposes. He asked the neighbor about all the families in the building and their cars. He left, but some minutes later he rang the neighbor's bell again. Through the intercom, he said, "I forgot to ask you about Mrs. Amini's car. Which one is hers?"

The neighbor had never given Amini's name. And everyone in the building knew her as Mrs. Montazeri.

Amini's e-mail in-box regularly overflowed with terrible stories from remote Iranian towns, from relatives and lawyers of the condemned who had heard of her work. Three men in Semnan province, she was told, were to be executed. She referred the case to another activist group. But one morning at five o'clock their lawyer called Amini to say that the men had been hanged. Suddenly, she could not move her hand. About once a week now, she felt her body quake, as though feverish, in the night. She figured that it was a virus. She took pills, but the shivering returned.

There was trouble within the Stop Stoning Forever campaign—divisions and disagreements among colleagues—even



as its caseload grew. Amini was on the phone one afternoon, in a tense discussion with one of her colleagues, when she fell down. The phone dropped. She wasn't asleep—she could hear the room around her—but she couldn't move. For an hour or two, she lay there.

In the days that followed, she had pulverizing headaches that responded to no pill, no therapy. Finally, she went to see a neurologist. She'd had some kind of nervous shock, he surmised, from extreme stress. There was nothing to do but rest. One day, she couldn't move her eyes, her shoulders, her neck. She went to the hospital. Every test came back normal, and the hospital discharged her. But the pain in her head and, now, her eyes was unendurable. She felt as though her eyes would leave her skull. One morning, she woke up blind, with red swellings that blocked her vision.

While Amini convalesced, her colleagues dissolved the Stop Stoning Forever campaign into an umbrella organization based abroad. Like that, everything Amini had built disappeared. She would never learn the reason. Intelligence agents, meanwhile, had broken into her office and searched her files. They called in Amini and interrogated her about her activities. The interrogator also asked about her health—specifically, her eyes, as if to let her know that even her body was under surveillance. He seemed most curious about the network of civil-society activists that she had helped forge.

By March, 2009, Amini was physically well again. But when she thought of the families of the condemned who had placed dim and fragile hopes in her, and of how she could not explain to them the collapse of the campaign, she became depressed. In one of her poems, she addressed her interrogator: "How many times have I asked you/'Don't come to my dreams with a gun.'"

On her blog, she observed that she had become deeply enmeshed with the subjects of her research. Leyla, Sahaaleh, and others peopled her dreams. She had sat alongside mothers at the scaffolds of their sons. She had no models, no mentors, no handbook to follow that might have cautioned her to keep her distance or flagged the signs of her collapse.

"The truth is that we work on a remote island," she wrote. "We are alone. I realized this while I was staring at the ceiling for two months with painful eyes."

That June, a Presidential election returned Ahmadinejad to office for a second term, provoking a storm of protest. The demonstrations were the largest and most sustained that Iran had known since its 1979 revolution. Amini was there, elated. When security forces cracked down, Amini was there, too, beaten with batons and nursing her concussion in the first courtyard that she could find off the street. She spent the chaotic days of unrest searching for the mothers of demonstrators who'd been killed, in an effort to record their stories. She reported for a Web site, Roozonline, using four pseudonyms.

People she knew were disappearing. Often, they were arrested in the middle of the night, spirited off to prison for unknown terms. Amini had visions of her own midnight arrest, before the terrified eyes of nine-year-old Ava. Sometimes she felt that she was waiting for this. A friend cautioned her that it was obvious which online pseudonyms were hers. An intelligence operative who knew her style of writing could figure it out.

Reformist journalists and politicians appeared on television, in prison garb, confessing that they'd taken part in a seditious conspiracy. When Amini saw them, she cried. These well-known people were hardly recognizable. If they had broken in prison, what would happen to her?

Early one Friday morning, a woman rang Amini's doorbell. It was an acquaintance of Montazeri's. Two days earlier, she had been released from prison after being arrested at a small demonstration in Valiasr Square. Thirty-six women had been held in her cell, she said, and half of them had been questioned about Asieh Amini. The woman told Amini that she should leave her house.

Before the election, Amini had been invited to a poetry festival in Sweden. She wrote to the Swedish Ambassador.

She would go to the festival, she told him, but she needed to bring her daughter. At the airport, she left her cell phone open, connected on a call to Montazeri, so that he could listen and know if she and Ava were stopped. But they got through.

Every day, Montazeri and Amini talked on Skype. He told her that things were getting worse at home. The defendant in one of her cases, Behnoud Shojaie, who had been seventeen when he killed a man in a fight, was executed. Amini's friends in prison had been swallowed into the system; there was nothing anyone could do for them.

Everything Amini was, and everything she did, was tied to her country—its complexities, its language, its terrors, and its splendors. She was not an engineer, with skills that could be transferred anywhere in the world. She would carry, always, a weight of work unfinished, a sense of being needed in a place where she couldn't live. On a cell wall in the women's section of Tehran's Evin Prison, she was told, an inmate had etched one of her poems: "Eve was not tall enough/I'll pick all the apples."

Through a program for writers at risk, she landed in Trondheim, Norway, as the poet-in-residence at the public library. Montazeri joined her and Ava there. She published two books of poetry and started work on a memoir, studied Norwegian, and regarded her new compatriots with a warm and gentle quizzicality.

The landscape, in its jagged immensity and its brilliant blues and greens, its rock-faced coast and glassy fjord, reminded her and Montazeri of Mazandaran. In Trondheim, there were days in summer when the sun never set, and days in winter when it never rose. The light had

a broad, flat quality, and life an element of unreality. Even the highway to the airport cut through spectacular, unspoiled scenes of undulating land and saturated color. Not far from Amini's apartment building was a recreational sight of singular frivolity: beach-volleyball courts. As though the world were such a place, and Amini such a person as to live in it. ♦





DESIGN BY JASON FULFORD



The friends met for dinner, as they did the second Sunday of every month, at a small Italian restaurant on the Upper East Side. There were three couples: Marty and Barbara, Jerry and Maureen, and John and Marcia, who had recently returned from a week-long island getaway to celebrate their twenty-ninth wedding anniversary. “Were the beaches beautiful? How was the hotel? Was it safe? Was it memorable? Was it worth the money?” the friends asked.

Marcia said, “You had to see it to believe it. The ocean was like bathwater. The sunsets? Better than any painting. But the political situation, don’t get me started. All the beggars!” She put a hand over her heart and sipped her wine. “Who knows who’s in charge? It’s utter chaos. Meanwhile, the people all speak *English!*” The vestiges of colonialism, the poverty, the corruption—it had all depressed her. “And we were harassed,” she told the friends. “By prostitutes. *Male* ones. They followed us down the beach like cats. The strangest thing. But the beach *was* absolutely gorgeous. Right, John?”

John sat across the table, swirling his spaghetti. He glanced up at Marcia, nodded, winked.

The friends wanted to know what the prostitutes had looked like, how they’d dressed, what they’d said. They wanted details.

“They looked like normal people,” Marcia said, shrugging. “You know, just young, poor people, locals. But they were very complimentary. They kept saying, ‘Hello, nice people. Massage? Nice massage for nice people?’”

“Little did they know!” John joked, furrowing his eyebrows like a maniac. The friends laughed.

“We’d read about it in the guidebook,” Marcia said. “You’re not supposed to acknowledge them at all. You don’t even look them in the eye. If you do, they’ll never leave you alone. The beach boys. The male prostitutes, I mean. It’s *sad*,” she added. “Tragic. And, really, one wonders how anybody can starve in a place like that. There was food everywhere. Fruit on every tree. I just don’t understand it. And the city was rife with garbage. *Rife!*” she proclaimed. She put down her fork. “Wouldn’t you say, hon?”

“I wouldn’t say ‘rife,’” John answered, wiping the corners of his mouth with his cloth napkin. “Fragrant, more like.”

The waiter collected the unfinished plates of pasta, then returned and took their orders of cheesecake and pie and decaffeinated coffee. John was quiet. He scrolled through photos on his cell phone, looking for a picture he’d taken of a monkey seated on the head of a Virgin Mary statue. The statue was painted in bright colors, and its nose was chipped, showing the white, chalky plaster under the paint. The monkey was black and skinny, with wide-spaced, neurotic eyes. Its tail curled under Mary’s chin. John turned the screen of his phone toward the table.

“This little guy,” he said.

“Aw!” the friends cried. They wanted to know, “Were the monkeys feral? Were they smelly? Are the people Catholic? Are they all very religious there?”

“Catholic,” Marcia said, nodding. “And the monkeys were everywhere. Cute but very sneaky. One of them stole John’s pen right out of his pocket.” She rattled off whatever facts she could remember from the nature tour they’d taken. “I think there are laws about eating the monkeys. I’m not so sure. They all spoke English,” she repeated, “but sometimes it was hard to understand them. The *guides*, I mean, not the monkeys.” She chuckled.

“The monkeys spoke Russian, naturally,” John said, and put away his phone.

The table talk moved on to plans for renovating kitchens, summer shares, friends’ divorces, new movies, books, politics, sodium, and cholesterol. They drank the coffees, ate the desserts. John peeled the wrapper off a roll of antacids. Marcia showed off her new wristwatch, which she’d purchased duty-free at the airport. Then she reapplied her lipstick in the reflection in her water glass. When the check came, they all did the math, divvying up the cost. Finally, they paid and went out onto the street and the women hugged and the men shook hands.

“Welcome home,” Jerry said. “Back to civilization.”

“Ooh-ooh ah-ah!” John cried, imitating a monkey.

“Jesus, John,” Marcia whispered, blushing and batting the air with her hand as if shooing a fly.

Each couple went off in a different direction. John was a bit drunk. He’d finished Marcia’s second glass of wine because she’d said it was giving her a headache. He took her arm as they turned the corner onto East Eighty-second Street toward the Park. The streets were nearly empty, late as it was. The whole city felt hushed, focussed, like a young dancer counting her steps.

Marcia fussed with her silk scarf, also purchased duty-free at the airport. The pattern was a paisley print in red and black and emerald green and had reminded her of the vibrant colors she’d seen the locals wearing on the island. Now she regretted buying the scarf. The tassels were short and fuzzy, and she thought they made the silk look cheap. She could give the scarf away as a gift, she supposed, but to whom? It had been so expensive, and her closest friends—the only people she would ever spend so much money on—had just seen her wearing it. She sighed and looked up at the moon as they entered the Park.

“Thank God Jerry and Maureen are getting along again,” Marcia said. “It was exhausting when they weren’t.”

“Marty was funny about the wine, wasn’t he?” John said. “I told him I was fine with Syrah. What does it matter? *Que sera, sera.*” He unhooked his arm from Marcia’s elbow and put it around her shoulder.

“It gave me such a headache,” Marcia complained. “Should we cut across the field, or go around?”

“Let’s be bold.”

They stepped off the gravel onto the grass. It was a dark, clear night in the Park, quiet except for the sound of distant car horns and ripping motors echoing faintly through the trees. John tried for a moment to forget that the city was right there, surrounding them. He’d been disappointed by how quickly his life had returned to normal after the vacation. As before, he woke up in the morning, saw patients all day long, returned home to eat dinner with Marcia, watched the evening news, bathed, and went to bed. It was a good life, of course. He wasn’t suffering from a grave illness; he wasn’t starving; he wasn’t being exploited or enslaved. But, gazing out the window of the tour bus on the island, he had felt envious of the locals, of their ability to do whatever

was in their nature. His own struggles seemed like petty complications, meaningless snags in the dull itinerary that was his life. Why couldn't he live by instinct and appetite, be primitive, be free?

At a rest stop, John had watched a dog covered in mange and bleeding pustules rub itself against a worn wooden signpost. He was lucky, he thought, not to be that dog. And then he felt ashamed of his privilege and his discontentedness. "I should be happy," he told himself. "*Marcia* is." Even the beggars tapping on car windows, begging for pennies, were smiling. "Hello, nice people," the beach boys had said. John had wanted to return their salutations and ask what it was that they had to offer. He'd been curious. But Marcia had shushed him, taken his hand, and plodded down the beach with her eyes fixed on the blank sand.

Crossing the lawn in Central Park, John now tried to recall the precise rhythm of the crashing waves on the beach on the island, the smell of the ocean, the magic and the danger he'd sensed brewing under the surface of things. But it was impossible. This was New York City. When he was in it, it was the only place on earth. He looked up. The moon was just a sliver, a comma, a single eyelash in the dark, starless sky.

"I forgot to call Lenore," Marcia was saying as they walked. "Remind me tomorrow. She'll be upset if I don't call. She's so uptight."

They reached the edge of the lawn and stepped onto a paved path that led them up to a bridge over a plaza, where people were dancing in pairs to traditional Chinese music. John and Marcia stopped to watch the dark shapes moving in the soft light of lanterns. A young man on a skateboard rumbled past them.

"Home sweet home," Marcia said.

John yawned and tightened his arm around her shoulder. The silk of Marcia's scarf was slippery, like cool water rippling between his fingers. He leaned over and kissed her forehead. There she was, his wife of nearly thirty years. As they walked on, he thought of how pretty she'd been when they were first married. In all their years together, he had never been interested in other women, had never strayed, had even refused the advances of a colleague one night, a few

years ago, at a conference in Baltimore. The woman had been twenty years his junior, and when she invited him up to her room John had blushed and made a stuttering apology, then spent the rest of the evening on the phone with Marcia. "What did she expect from me?" he'd asked. "Some kind of sex adventure?"

"We can watch that movie when we get home," Marcia said as they reached the edge of the Park. "The one about the jazz musician."

"Whatever you like," John said. He yawned again.

"Maureen said it was worth watching."

"It's unconscionable what they are doing to you, Eduardo," Marcia said to the doorman in the lobby of their building. The doormen were petitioning management to provide a proper chair for them to sit in. All they had now was a tall stool with no back. "To have to stand for that many hours, doesn't that constitute torture? John is going to have a word with them. They'll do something. They have to." Marcia pulled the silk scarf from her neck and folded it in her hands.

Eduardo leaned on his little podium, propped his chin in his hand. "How was the vacation?" he asked.

"Oh, it was wonderful, wonderful. Everything. I mean, the seafood was just beyond compare! The ocean was like bathwater," Marcia answered. "And now we're utterly exhausted."



"Jet-lagged," John said.

Eduardo tapped his pen on the podium. "When I go home to my country, it's the same. I don't sleep."

"Yes, it's rough. Well, good night," Marcia sang.

She and John climbed the wide marble stairs to their second-floor apartment. They'd lived in the building for twenty-six years. They could have navigated their way through the lobby and up the stairs in complete darkness, and

had, in fact, done so during a blackout one summer when all of Manhattan lost power for a night. Marcia had enjoyed it. They'd lit candles, eaten the ice cream that was going to melt anyway, and talked.

Now they walked down the bright, wallpapered hallway, and John unlocked the door to their apartment. Inside, there was still a stack of unopened mail on the front table, a blinking red light on the answering machine, a smell of mothballs from the closet where Marcia had been looking for her squash racket earlier that day. "I want to get it restrung *now*," she'd insisted, "before it's too late."

"Too late for what?" John had asked.

"For when someone asks me to play."

John had stood and watched his wife's bottom wiggle as she stooped down into the depths of the closet. She was in remarkable shape for a woman in her fifties. She often teased John that he needed to start taking better care of himself. "I'm going to make it to a hundred and five. You don't want me to have to replace you, do you?"

"You'd have no problem, I'm sure," John answered.

It was true. People liked Marcia. All of John and Marcia's friends were really friends of *hers*. John sometimes felt as if he were just a strange appendage to his wife. Surely she could have done better—a brain surgeon, a lawyer, a physicist. Had he given her the life she deserved? They did take a trip every year, usually in late summer to celebrate their anniversary, but that was all. They'd never had children. John had never won any awards.

"I'm going to take a Tylenol for my headache," Marcia said. "Want to get the movie set up?" She shut the closet door and ran her fingers across the squash racket, which now lay on the table in the hallway.

"Will you eat popcorn?" John asked.

"I really shouldn't. But if you're making some . . ." Her voice trailed off as she walked down the hallway to the bathroom, flicking on the lights and rubbing her temples.

John went to the kitchen and got the jar of popcorn kernels down from the cupboard. He liked to make popcorn the old-fashioned way, in a big steel pot with a long metal arm that stirred the kernels. He lit the stove,



melted the margarine, poured the popcorn in, and stood over the pot with his eyes closed, turning the handle slowly and feeling the warm air rise toward him, remembering moments on the island when the sun on his face had struck him as so hot, so intimate, it was like Marcia's breath on his cheek.

As the kernels began to pop, he brought his ear to the lid of the pot, closer to the heat and the noise. The irregular staccato made his pulse speed up. The heart fascinated him. Sometimes he liked to put his ear to Marcia's chest and listen. Her heartbeat was light and chatty, a rhythm that made you want to waltz around the kitchen. John could have been a cardiologist, but he'd pursued dermatology instead. At parties, he wowed people with descriptions of boils and rashes and growths, strange hair patterns, nasty scars, pus-filled cysts, bizarre freckles, cancers, moles. "Within six feet of this fellow, you could detect the distinct smell of porcini risotto," he'd say. "His armpit was filled with fungus." At the stove, John righted himself, continued to stir the popcorn with one hand, and took his own pulse with two fingers of the other, pressing on his throat and breathing slowly until his heart rate returned to normal.

Meanwhile, Marcia took two extra-strength Tylenol, splashed some cold water on her face, brushed her teeth, and went to sit on the leather sofa in front of the television in the living room. A sudden excruciating pain in her head made her vision blurry. It was as if she'd been plunged underwater, the room murky and muffled, and she couldn't breathe. She tried to call out to John. "Honey? John?" She could only gasp. Her throat gurgled, her hands trembled, and then she died. It was that simple. She was gone.

When all was quiet, John turned off the stove and poured the popcorn into a wooden salad bowl. He carried the bowl and the saltshaker into the living room, sat down next to Marcia's dead body, salted the popcorn, ate several handfuls, and turned on the television. "Which movie did you say?" he asked her, scrolling through the pay-per-view listings. He looked at her downturned face. Her head hung to one side, resting on her shoulder. John smoothed her hair, put a hand on her knee for a moment,



*"Can you cleanse the space of all the roach and mice spirits?"*

changed the channel to the baseball game, lowered the volume, ate the rest of the popcorn, then fell asleep beside her.

"I'm sorry, Mr. John," Eduardo said in the lobby, as the body was wheeled out early the next morning. John nodded, still in shock, having woken up and discovered Marcia, cold and limp, slumped across the couch beside him. He followed the E.M.T.s out onto the street and watched them load her into the back of the ambulance and drive away, the siren blaring—but for what? "She's already dead!" John cried out after them. Eduardo took him by the arm and led him back inside and up to the apartment. A neighbor brought him some water from the kitchen. The glass, a souvenir from a cruise that he and Marcia had taken through the fjords of Norway, retained a faint smear of her berry-colored lipstick on its rim.

John put his mouth on it and sipped.

The memorial service was a week later. The chapel ceiling at St. Ignatius was vaulted and painted a cornflower blue with spiky white stars. The carpet was dark red, with a jagged gold pattern that reminded John of shattered glass. Marcia's friends filled the pews. They moaned and wept. Maureen and Barbara embraced John and held his hands and babbled all at once, drowning out the few words he had to say as he took his seat in the front pew. He dabbed at his eyes with old tissues he found squirreled away in the breast pocket of his suit.

Several friends told stories, boasting about how much Marcia had meant to them, how deeply she'd touched their lives. Marcia would have liked it, John thought—all these people discussing her, pointing out her best qualities, remembering her finest moments. She'd have eaten it up. But what did these

people really know about her? What *could* one know about a person? John had known her best of all, had been able to predict her every move, the arc of her sighs, her laughs, the twists of her shadow as it crossed a room. In the days since her death, he'd felt her drifting through the apartment. He'd done double takes the way you do when you think you see your own cat or dog begging for food under the table at a restaurant. Nobody would understand, John thought, how well he knew the sound of Marcia's coffee spoon hitting the saucer, how the sheets rustled around her when she turned over in bed. But were those things significant enough, he wondered, to boast about?

When it was his turn to get up, John spoke of their recent trip to the island. "She was so happy there," he said. "So *alive*." He paused, waiting for a laugh, but there was none. He looked out at the crowd, all those drawn, wrinkled faces wet with emotion. He could imagine Marcia sitting among them, already composing her opinion of the speech he was giving. "He was terribly overcome," he imagined her saying to her friends over coffee and cake at the reception. "You could see him really straining to get something across. To no avail, I'm afraid. Well, that's John. Not the best talker. But that's why we got along so well."

John leaned against the lectern for balance, trying to think of interesting memories to relate. "The seafood," he began to say, but stopped himself. It all seemed so trite. "Why tell stories?" he wondered aloud. "As soon as something is over, that's it. Why revive it constantly? Things happen, and then more things, inevitably, happen next. So?" He shrugged. His hands trembled. He tried to smile, but he was now, indeed, terribly overcome. He left the lectern, tripping down the shallow steps. He felt as he did when he was gassed at the dentist's office—disoriented, befuddled. "Eduardo?" John called out. He staggered drunkenly. His secretary came up and guided him back to his seat.

Maureen took the stage next and recited what she claimed was one of Marcia's favorite poems. John pulled the last crumpled tissue from his breast pocket. He found a tiny wishbone

wrapped up inside it. He recalled a dermatology-conference dinner, where quail had been served, a few years earlier. He'd planned on bringing the wishbone home so that he and Marcia could make a wish together. John always wished for whatever Marcia wished for. "This way, we both win," he said. Now he pulled the bone from the tissue and held it in his hand as he dried his tears. Poor Marcia, he thought. She could have wished for everlasting life.

"We passed the fields of gazing grain, we passed the setting sun," Maureen was saying, her voice swelling and shaking in a way that she must have rehearsed for days, John thought. He'd always secretly hated Maureen. Her tireless obsession with rain-forest conservation confounded him. The woman was from White Plains, for Christ's sake. He would not miss Maureen, or any of Marcia's friends, for that matter. "Poor Marcia, she really loved you, you know," Barbara had told him before the memorial. Of course he knew that Marcia loved him. They'd been married for nearly thirty years. People feel so special, so wise, when somebody they know drops

dead. "We'd just seen her at dinner," he'd heard Maureen telling someone. "And to think, just a few hours later, she was gone forever. Isn't life strange?"

But life wasn't strange at all. Marcia's sudden death was the strangest thing that had ever happened to John. And even that wasn't very strange. People died all the time, in fact. As he crushed the tiny wishbone in his fist, it cracked into pointy shards that poked into the skin of his palm like needles. "Since then 'tis centuries; but each feels shorter than the day," Maureen continued. John shook his head at this nonsense. Listening to the stupid woman revel in the spotlight made him ill. He held his bleeding hand over his heart, feeling it pound like an axe through a thick wooden door. His throat clenched with what—sorrow? Was that all it was? He scoffed at how small that seemed. Then something seemed to break inside him. His breath caught. He choked and coughed. The wild thumping of his heart stopped. He belched loudly, from the depths of his gut, as though releasing some dark spirit that had been lodged down there his whole life. His secretary laid a hand on his shoulder.

## IN UKRAINE

I do not ride as well as Dmitry. Still, I always  
manage to saddle the skittish pinto.

He doesn't know that I bribe her  
with peppermints and lemon cakes.

We hunt by letting our tight pack of hounds  
unravel into the grasses.

They frame the night with their howls.

I close my eyes to listen; Dmitry chews

on his prayers as he rides.

We are after nothing, really.



We've learned to come trundling  
 in our cracked-horn saddles  
  
 to be out of the range of men,  
 of the things men do.  
  
 Each ride is longer and longer  
 and we spoil in the safety of solitude.  
  
 At first, we'd lose the lead dog to the smell  
 of home if we rode too long.  
  
 Now he comes back.  
 He gets a little piece of cake, too.

—*Jacob Shores-Arguello*

"Excuse me," John said, wiping saliva from his mouth. When he looked up again, Maureen's poem was over. He straightened in his seat and felt his heart start back up. Its beat was now soft and aimless, like a baby's babbling. He was calm, he thought. He was fine.

Next, Marcia's choir group took the stage and began to sing an old Negro spiritual. They sang lifelessly, as though the song didn't mean anything to them. Perhaps it didn't. John rose and walked up the aisle to the bathroom at the back of the chapel. He blew his nose for a while in the stall, urinated, defecated, then flushed the broken wishbone down the toilet.

A week later, John still had not returned to work. He spent his days in silence, eating duty-free Ferrero Rocher chocolates and bouncing the strings of Marcia's squash racket against his skull. He paced the apartment, his mind empty but for the bits of music he heard from cars passing on the street outside. Or he sat on the leather sofa in front of the muted television, which was showing back-to-back episodes of true-crime docudramas. People liked

to kill one another, it seemed, on speedboats. Aliases, disguises, offshore bank accounts—these notions began to pepper John's mind. With Marcia gone, perhaps he could fill his remaining years with criminal pursuits, he thought. He was too clumsy to be a cat burglar. But couldn't he stalk someone? Or vandalize something? Library books? The back seats of taxis? Easiest would be to send death threats to someone he despised—Maureen, perhaps. He could do that without even leaving the apartment. He winced at his cowardice. At every stage of his life he'd been reasonable, dutiful. He'd prescribed creams, lanced cysts, cut plantar warts out of the rubbery soles of smelly feet. Once, he'd pulled a seven-foot coil of ingrown hair from an abscess on the tip of a patient's tailbone. That was as wild as it got for John. He'd never been in a fight. His body bore no scars. The hands now folded in his lap were bland, beige, wrinkled in all the predictable ways.

The spot he'd chosen for the urn of Marcia's ashes was on a shelf in the kitchen, next to the coffee grinder and the mini food processor that she had used expressly for guacamole. "The se-

cret is to freeze it first," he recalled her saying. Or was that something else? John didn't care. He'd had enough of what people said, tips and tales, theories, tidbits. If he could have it his way, nobody would ever say anything again. The entire world would go silent. Even the clocks wouldn't tick. All that mattered would be the beating of hearts, the widening and narrowing of pupils, the whirling of ties and loose strands of hair in the wind—nothing voluntary, nothing false. He opened the fridge and peeled back the tinfoil from a dish one of the friends had brought over. Fat from the chicken had congealed into a dun-colored jelly. He stuck his finger in it, just to feel the cold gunk.

Then the phone rang.

"And?" is how John answered. The voice on the line was a recording from the local convenience store. Marcia's photos had been printed and were ready to be picked up. She'd used a disposable camera on their trip to the island. John hung up the phone. Marcia's purse was where she'd left it, on the table in the hallway. He rifled through and found the claim stub in her wallet. Without changing out of his pajamas, he put on a jacket and shoes and went down to the lobby.

"How are you, Mr. John?" Eduardo asked. He followed John to the door and opened it, his black rubber shoes squeaking on the polished marble floor.

John didn't answer. He had nothing to say. He let his head hang and plodded slowly down the block. He didn't care if people thought he looked forlorn or deranged. Let them judge. Let them entertain themselves with their stories, he thought.

At the convenience store, he went to the counter and pulled out the claim stub. When the shopgirl asked for his last name, he handed over his business card.

"Can you confirm the home address?" she asked.

John shook his head.

The girl rolled her eyes. "Are you deaf or something?" she asked.

"Maaa, haa," John said. He ground his jaws and pointed to his ears.

"O.K.," the girl said, softening. She held up a finger. "One minute."

John nodded. Why would she need

to confirm his address, anyway? What kind of impostor would want someone else's photographs? Someone with a speedboat, perhaps. John laughed at himself. "Maaa, haa," he said again.

"I'm sorry, sir. I can't understand you," the girl said. She slid the packet of photos across the counter and pointed to the glowing numbers on the cash register's display screen. She held up her forefinger and thumb and rubbed them together. "Money," she said. "*Dinero*."

"Gaaah," John said. He handed her the cash, then grunted. The girl waved goodbye cheerfully. If Marcia could see him now, acting like some kind of Frankenstein, she'd laugh, John thought.

He pulled the photos from their sleeve and shuffled through them on the way home. There were half a dozen shots of ocean waves, the horizon, and several street scenes, each interrupted by the splatter of bird shit on the car window through which they'd been taken. Nothing looked as beautiful as it had in real life. The people, the buildings, the beach—it was all flat and dull, despite the glossy finish of the photo paper. There was a closeup of cocktails served in coconuts and decorated with toothpick-speared chunks of pineapple and orange slices and Maraschino cherries, colorful paper

umbrellas, curlicue straws. On either side of the frame were the brown, deeply lined hands of the server holding the raffia tray. There was a shot of Marcia's ankles, her feet plunged deep into the pale-gray sand. It had been gritty, soft, dry volcanic ash, like what was left of Marcia in the urn in the kitchen, John supposed. There were a few photos of the pool snapped from the balcony of their hotel room, a blurry shot of John on his cell phone in the lobby, one of John shaking hands with a tiny monkey in the forest, John shaking hands with the nature guide, John eating a platter of crabs. There was only one photo of Marcia, a self-portrait taken in the reflection of the vanity mirror in the hotel bathroom. She smiled coquettishly in her berry-colored lipstick, her face a floating mask above the white orb of the flash.

The final photo in the set seemed to be an extra, a half-exposure at the end of the roll. The right side of the picture was gray, empty. A red line went down the center like a burn mark. The left side showed the grainy landscape of the beach at night, and, in the bottom corner, the top half of a face. It belonged to a local, a native. A beach boy, John presumed, one of those male prostitutes. The dark skin appeared almost black in the dimness

of the picture. Only the whites of the eyes glistened, almost yellow, like hanging lanterns. Marcia had taken the photo by accident, John supposed. But when had she come so close to a beach boy? She'd made such a fuss about keeping her distance. During that first walk, when the beach boys had followed them, Marcia had hurried back to the hotel grounds and insisted vehemently that John look away. "If you make eye contact, it's like an invitation," she'd said.

"To what?" John had asked.

"To a party you wouldn't like," she'd answered, "and that you'd have to pay for."

"Would *you* like it?" he'd asked. He'd been joking, of course. Marcia had said nothing.

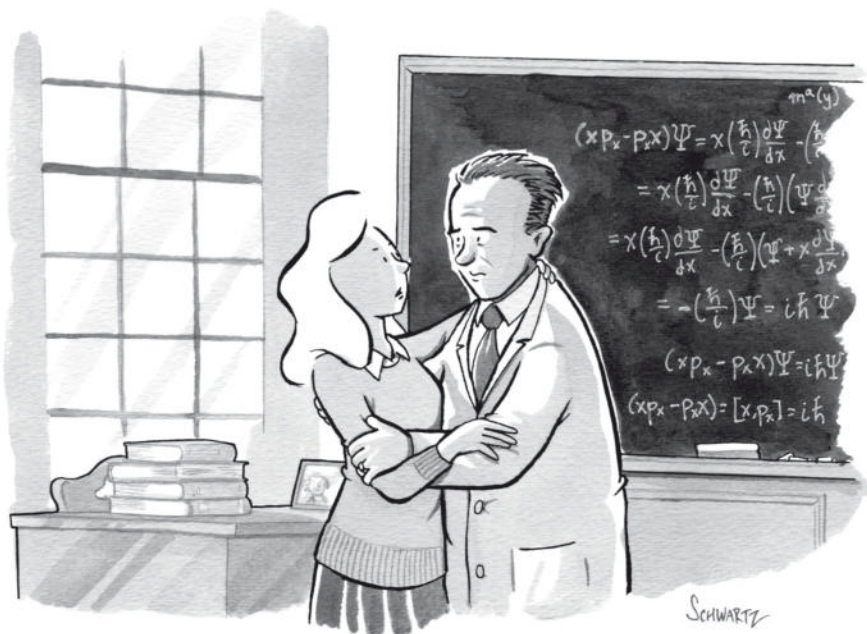
"Hello, nice people? Hello?"

At home, John found Marcia's magnifying glass in her bedside drawer. He sat down, turned on the lamp, and held the magnifying glass over the beach boy's eyes, hoping he might find some kind of explanation reflected in them. Had Marcia been unfaithful? Had she been pretending, as long as John had known her, to be a prude? He craned his neck and brought his own eye closer and closer to the photo, squinting, straining every muscle until he found something he took to be a sign, an invitation—a single red pixel in the darkness of the boy's right pupil.

Back on the island, John stood once again in the hotel lobby. The overnight flight had been bumpy. He hadn't slept at all. The radio in the hotel shuttle from the airport had warned of hurricane-force gales, possible flooding, thunder, lightning. A murky bank of clouds crept slowly but steadily across the sky.

"Will we have to evacuate?" John asked.

The desk attendant rubbed her eyes. "Maybe, sir. They don't tell us anything." She slid John's room key across the counter. Behind the check-in desk, the clerks were talking and yawning and sharing small cookies from a grease-soaked paper bag. John remembered the cookies from a tour of the market on the other side of the island. The guide had explained to him and Marcia that the cookies were made not



*"I know where we stand right now, Dr. Heisenberg, but where are we going?"*



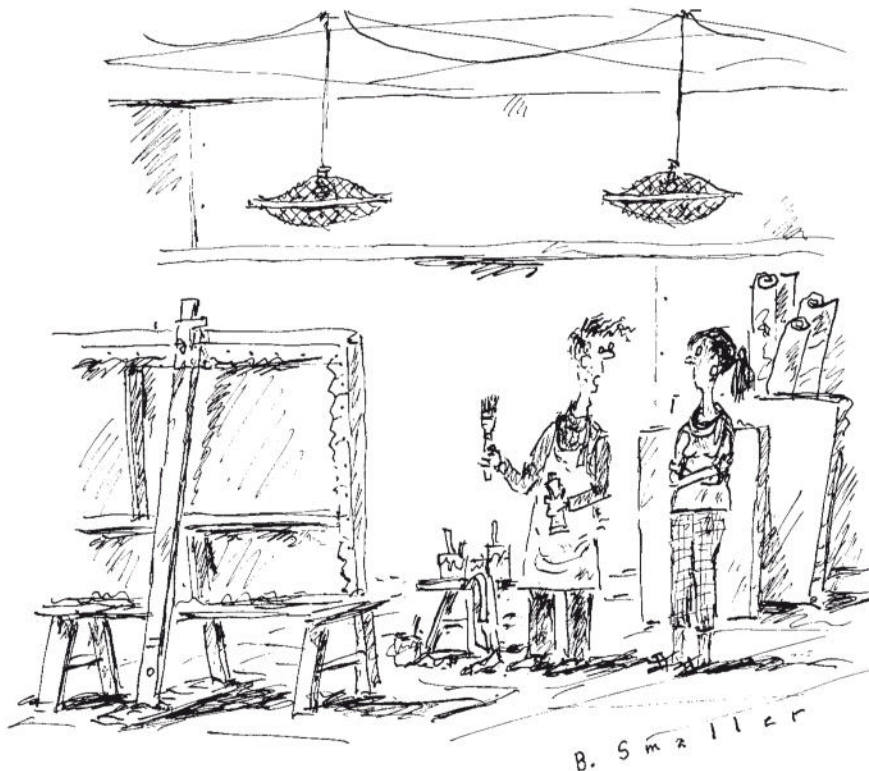
from flour but from some native root vegetable, molasses, and butter that came from goat's milk. A sack of twenty cookies cost less than a dollar.

"Can you imagine?" Marcia had whispered.

John had hoped that the guide would arrange for them to try some, but they'd simply idled by the vender's cart, Marcia covering her mouth and nose with a tissue, while the guide chatted with a passerby in the local patois. *Rife*, John recalled now. The sights and sounds and smells of the market came back to him. There were bowls of spices and beans of every hue, hot goat's milk poured from dirty metal teapots atop charcoal briquettes into small plastic cups like the ones John used at the dentist's to rinse and spit. Hot smoke from cauldrons of roasting meat roiled across baskets of nuts and fruits, stacks of woven shawls that the women used as slings to carry their babies on their backs, pyramids of pastel-colored toilet-paper rolls. In a dark corner of the market, they'd passed an old man, his eyes sky blue with cataracts. He sat behind a table full of empty Coke bottles and tin cans. Beside him was a rickety chest of drawers. When John asked what the man was selling, the guide answered "spiritual medicine," twirled his finger in the air, and widened his eyes, as though to make fun of the crazy old man. "People in the villages believe in that nonsense," the guide said. "They believe in magic. *Evil*." He crossed himself and laughed, then yelled at a young girl who had splashed dirty water on his shoes while rolling her bike through a puddle on the path. One of Marcia's photos had been of that market. The royal-blue plastic tarps covering the stalls appeared nearly black, like funeral shrouds. Recalling that image now gave John the chills. He'd told everyone back home that he was going to the island to scatter Marcia's ashes. That was the excuse he gave.

As John unlocked the door of his hotel room, a family passed by him in the hall—parents with three sleepy children.

"Last flight back to the mainland," the father said with a British accent, his arms full of gape-mouthed, plush toy monkeys.



*"Hedge-fund managers have to hang something over their sofas, too."*

John wasn't very worried. The beach boys would not get swept away in any flood, he knew. He had spotted a few of them already on the drive from the hotel. For prostitutes, he thought, they seemed so relaxed walking along the road, so casual in their sun-bleached striped T-shirts, their rubber sandals grinding over the gray dirt. His plan was to find the boy from Marcia's photo and do whatever she had done with him off in the dunes at night while he was sleeping. That would be revenge enough to set his heart at ease, he thought. It would be the strange thing that gave his life some meaning at last. It would be his life's one adventure.

He inspected his hotel room, approving of the lone queen-size bed, the flat-screen mounted on the wall, the small window that looked out onto the beach. The sky had an eerie, vapid whiteness. John could see the red-tiled roof of the hotel's al-fresco dining area and one corner of the fence that partitioned the beach. To get to a private spot where he could dump the ashes in the water, he'd have to go beyond that fence. A few beach boys sat perched

in the dunes beyond the hotel, like exotic birds in their bright-colored shorts. Even with no sun to reflect off their taut dark-brown skin, their bare backs gleamed. If only he had Marcia's opera glasses, John thought, he could see their faces.

The heavy-duty black plastic bag containing Marcia's ashes had passed through customs undetected. Of course, John had left the metal urn at home. He figured that if anyone asked what the bag contained he'd say that it was medicinal bath salts to soak his feet in. But nobody questioned him. He took Marcia's ashes out of his suitcase, carried the bag down to the empty dining room, selected a stale roll from the breakfast-buffet table, sat and ate it, and pocketed a knife from the place setting. He nodded and smiled at the hotel workers, who were busy shuttering the windows in preparation for the storm.

Outside, the wind whipped at John's face, forcing him to pitch his head forward as he walked along the fence. Sand pricked at his skin like needles. As he approached the waves, the sky flashed. A moment later, thunder pealed

long and deep, and a few cold drops of rain fell on his back. He crouched by the water and took out the knife. It was a cheap knife, with dull, wide serrations. The plastic of the bag was so thick that he had to place it on the sand, hold it down with one hand, and stab at it repeatedly. To keep the sand out of his eyes, he shut them. He thought one last time of Marcia, pictured her clucking her tongue at this indecorous ceremony. He thought of all the wishbone wishes he'd wasted on her petty desires: good seats at the movies, a trip to Vermont to see the foliage, a sale on cashmere sweaters or towels. And, secretly, all along she'd been a whore, he thought, a deviant, a pervert, carousing with prostitutes right under his nose! Meanwhile, she'd shushed him every time he'd said anything remotely off-color, as if anyone were paying attention, as if it even mattered. John tore at the hole he'd made in the plastic bag, crawled over the sand on his knees, felt for the water, and dumped the ashes out.

A mere hour later, the storm was over. The sky was gray, but the rain had stopped. Little damage had been done to the island, though the hotel had lost electricity. John's room was dim. From his window, he watched the ocean pounding the beach in tall, floating waves, as the wind howled like a cartoon ghost in a haunted house, comically persistent. He stood and uselessly pressed the buttons on the TV remote, then stared at his reflection in the rectangular black screen. He was still wearing what he'd worn on the overnight flight: his gray summer-weight wool trousers and a white linen dress shirt. The shirt was now crushed and wrinkled, the collar warped around his neck. His face was swollen, his ears full of sand. His graying hair lay in waxy tendrils around his face. He laughed at his slovenly appearance and tried to smooth his hair back, but the rain and the salt air had dried it into straw. He didn't care. Marcia was gone for good now, and he felt like celebrating.

Downstairs in the empty restaurant, John took a seat on a barstool. Outside, workers were unfolding the

shutters from the dining-room windows. The clouds over the ocean were paler and thinner than before. He ordered a Glenfiddich, saluted the bartender, and drank. "How much for the whole bottle?" John asked. "No, don't tell me. Just charge it to my room." He flashed the number on his key. A whole bottle just for him, out from under Marcia's shaming gaze. Why had he let her control him like that? He'd lived his entire life on his best behavior, a slave to decorum. For what? John shook his head and poured himself more whiskey. He could do whatever he wanted now. He could buy a hundred goat-butter cookies. He could make all the crass jokes he liked. Through the windows, he saw the clouds part and the sun shine. The staff began to drag the lounge chairs and tables and umbrellas back onto the deck. A few large gulls coasted back and forth, low across the beach. John smacked his lips, slid off his barstool, and took the bottle of Glenfiddich down to the sand, carelessly kicking off his salt-stained leather loafers and peeling off his socks on the way. He walked around the hotel fence and along the shoreline for several minutes, well past the spot where he'd dumped Marcia's ashes.

The sand was cool and hard under his feet. The waves were high and frothy still, but he could swim, he thought, chugging from the bottle. He looked around to see if anyone was watching. The beach was empty. He stuck the Glenfiddich in the sand, quickly removed his pants, and started sloshing into the warm, churning water. He waded in waist high, stiffening his body against the turbulent gushes, which seemed somehow gentle and powerful at once. He looked out at the horizon. This was what the beach was good for: staring out at the sea gave one the feeling of infinity. But it was an illusion, John thought. The sea wasn't infinite. There was land on the other side. Wasn't that always the truth about things? That they ended? How many more years did he have, at this point? Ten? Twenty? A powerful wave knocked him down, and when he righted himself and found his footing he was facing the shore. A beach boy in tiny, bright-red shorts stood on the sand,

watching him. John waved and hollered "Hello!" just before the next wave pulled him under.

A few weeks later, telling the story over dinner, John would explain that the storm had kept him cooped up for days. "It barely made a dent, that storm. But everything shut down. You know these poor countries—there's no infrastructure. Even if you did try to intervene and make some order, the people are all so superstitious, it would take a hundred years, with all their spells and blessings."

"Well, I think it's beautiful of you," Maureen said, "to go back there, with Marcia."

"She said it was heaven, after all," Barbara said. "Didn't she say that? That it was heaven?"

"She did say that, yes," Maureen answered.

John put a hand over his heart, which was now broken by something he found far more interesting than a dead wife. His drunken jaunt on the beach had ended strangely. The beach boy, though not the one who'd appeared in Marcia's photograph, had indeed been young and beautiful, his eyes yellow, his lips thick and glossy. He'd spotted John flailing in the undertow, pulled him from the water, and dragged him to shore. John had rolled onto his side, sputtering and gagging on the salt water he'd swallowed. The boy stood over him, his strong brown legs just inches from John's naked body. "You saved me," John managed to say. As he reached a hand out to grip the boy's ankle, his fingers trembled. Some kind of force field seemed to surround the boy. He couldn't be touched. When John held his palm over the boy's foot, he could feel heat rising up. The boy took a step away. Perhaps he isn't even real, John thought. But there he was. "Come here," John demanded. "I need to ask you something." He got onto his hands and knees, tried to stand, but he was too exhausted. He was drunk. He collapsed on the sand. The boy stood and stared for a while, then yawned, turned, and walked away. It was clear to him and to the other beach boys watching from their perch in the dunes that the old man wasn't carrying any money. ♦



# THE CRITICS



ON TELEVISION

## INSIDE OUT

*The emotional acrobatics of “Transparent.”*

BY EMILY NUSSBAUM

“Please don’t do that to me—betray me and then tell me it’s a gift,” Rabbi Raquel says to Josh Pfefferman, who is trying to put a positive spin on having spilled the couple’s secrets to the world. Raquel’s plea may as well be printed as a motto on the Pfefferman insignia, a warning from this seduction-addicted family of Semitic shape-shifters.

Jill Soloway’s stealth masterpiece “Transparent,” which is now in its sec-

ond season, on Amazon, is a different kind of seducer, a TV series that makes revolutionary art seem both irresistible and inevitable. The story of a Los Angeles family whose elderly father comes out as transgender, transitioning from Mort into Maura (and from Poppa into Moppa), “Transparent” would have won polite praise even if it were merely a piece of well-made agitprop—a TED Talk on trans identity. Instead, it dived,

quick and confident, into murkier waters, exploring themes less comforting but more interesting than “love makes a family” sloganeering. Soloway’s world is aggressively specific: Jewy, screwy, L.A., upper middle class, not so much queer-friendly as queer-saturated. It’s role-model free. There are tears but no tear-jerking. Soloway likes to talk about the “female gaze,” film-studies jargon that might raise an eyebrow. But the show

makes the case for her fluid aesthetic, as well as for the “transformative action” program that she created for staff writers. Politics sharpen rather than blunt her artistic daring. As Grace Paley put it, “You write from what you know, but you write into what you don’t know.”

If you are averse to spoilers, don’t read on, because I’m about to go into some detail about the arc of the season, including revelations that are hinted at during the opening episode, in which an ecstatic performance of the Jewish wedding hora—big red lips ululating “Hava Nagila,” a young man whipping off his dress coat and entering into a trance—flashes us back to late-Weimar Berlin. But long story short: for most of the Pfeffermans, things did not get better. When Maura opened that closet, a black wave of secrets gushed out, from parental neglect to Josh’s entanglement, as a teen-ager, with a predatory female babysitter. Maura’s ex-wife, Shelly, and his three kids began to transition, too, like some Jewish rumspringa. Sarah wrecked her marriage for a giddy, idiotic affair with a woman; Josh took up with Rabbi Raquel (the wonderfully *heimische* Kathryn Hahn); and Ali wrenched her sexuality into new shapes, lit up by the idea that gender might be a playground rather than a prison.

The second season begins with Sarah’s wedding to that girlfriend, Tammy (the terrific Melora Hardin), a fancy event that goes spectacularly south. In a bravura opening sequence, the camera stays static, like a parody of the “Modern Family” titles, as Pfeffermans drift in and out of the wedding photographer’s frame, bickering, primping, as uncontrollable as a weather system. By the time Sarah stumbles down the aisle, her eyes twitching between thick bars of kohl, we’ve entered a tunnel of paranoia, edited as a panic attack; midway through their vows, she looks up and spots a plane pulling a banner that reads “WeBuyUglyHouses.com.” Afterward, Sarah is hysterical with regret, hiding in the bathroom: she hates her bride, she sobs, and her in-laws, too, “those fucking Wasps”—she wants *out*. To her relief, the marriage isn’t legal yet. “So what is a wedding, then?” Ali asks, amazed. “It’s a ritual,” Rabbi Raquel explains, calmly. “A pageant. It’s like a very expensive play.”

It would be easy to peg Sarah as a

spoiled asshole. (Her exes certainly do.) She’s a checked-out mom, a sybarite with time on her hands. And yet the show’s miracle—and that of Amy Landecker’s scorched performance, with her bitter bark of a laugh—is how much it forces you to empathize with Sarah’s most confused desires, and with those of Josh (Jay Duplass) and Ali (Gaby Hoffmann), a pair of snake charmers who may as well be selling Amway when it comes to intimacy. Like Larry David or Hannah Horvath, these are selfish people you can’t look away from, because they’re smart and funny, but also because the show presents their cruellest mistakes with clear eyes. On Yom Kippur, Sarah visits the bride she’s ditched, full of empty amends. “It’s kind of like trick-or-treating,” she says. “You go to people that you’ve hurt—you think about your wrongs and apologize and then ask for forgiveness. And then you *get* forgiveness. And then you sort of absolve yourself.” “Cool,” Tammy replies, eyes arctic. As she walks away, she deadpans, “Happy Yom Kippur.”

One of the show’s riskiest choices is its bluntness about the fact that Maura—so tentative in her flowing muumuus—retains much of the cranky, entitled privilege of Mort. In one scene, a lesbian poet (Cherry Jones) confronts Maura about her having blackballed female job applicants in grad school; in another, Maura’s extremely patient trans friend, Davina, an H.I.V.-positive ex-prostitute, reads her the riot act for class condescension. Maura reacts badly every time. And yet, owing to Jeffrey Tambor’s nervy performance, we also see that Maura is courageous just for refusing to disappear, to shrivel into little-old-ladyhood.

In one painful scene, she flirts with a woman at a bar, only to be stung by the revelation that her charm no longer translates, that she’s now “creepy.” And, in a beautifully filmed sex scene, Moppa fingers her ex-wife in the bathtub, an act that feels at once transgressive, tender, and cold. On one level, Shelly is coercing her ex-husband, taking advantage of the fact that Maura is temporarily homeless. But Maura is in control, too, and there’s dominance in the way she reaches beneath the water: with this one woman, she’s wanted, competent. Refreshingly, sex is never a trivial matter on “Transparent,” and although there’s plenty of nudity—and some cathartic

spanking—it’s never filmed for formulaic kicks. From the show’s perspective, there’s a reason that sex is called “knowing” someone. If you ruin your life for it, maybe your life needed ruining.

In last season’s most revelatory episode, Mort traded his daughter’s bat mitzvah for his shot at liberation. On the date of what would have been Ali’s coming-of-age celebration, he snuck out of town, ostensibly to an academic conference but in reality to a retreat for cross-dressers. High on the joy of being seen, Mort recognizes the truth: he’s not a man with a kink but a woman. Yet his breakthrough was built on a lie, a false bottom beneath their family album. It’s a lesson his kids appear to have absorbed, the hard stratagems of the closet. Unlike a Lanister, a Pfefferman rarely pays her debts.

This season extends that theme of buried memories much further, with a risky gambit: surreal flashbacks to a Holocaust trauma, two generations earlier in the Pfefferman line. Many of these visions spiral around Magnus Hirschfeld’s Institute for Sexual Science, in Berlin, one of the earliest pro-gay, pro-trans research institutions, and another carnival—a free space for erotic outsiders, where a liberated set kept dancing on the lip of the volcano, even as Fascism bubbled up. In contrast with the spontaneity of the modern scenes, these flashbacks are slightly candied, with the incongruity of dreams. The wonderful trans actress Hari Nef plays Tante Gittel, a mysterious ancestor whose pearl ring has been passed down to Maura’s children. She feels like an iconic character in a fairy tale about transformation (and isn’t every fairy tale about transformation?).

Soloway isn’t the first TV creator to use Nazism to illuminate queer suffering, or to remind us that Jews weren’t the only ones in the camps: Ryan Murphy pressed some of these bruises in “American Horror Story: Asylum.” But, even in a show as Jewish as “Transparent,” when you bring up Nazis and then point to L.A. you risk glibness, conflating unlike moral horrors (or just violating Godwin’s law). It shouldn’t work. But it does. Like some delirious artist standing in the desert, Soloway seems to be trying to stretch her stoned fingertips wide enough to embrace the stars, finding links between gender fluidity and

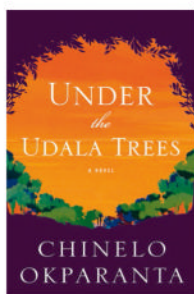


Jewishness, between Fascism and other sorts of political shunning, locating the brutality in being ostracized from a family of any kind. It's a relevant theme these days. And Soloway is onto something deep: so much of American gay politics emerged from the pain of Jewish queers—Harvey Milk, Larry Kramer, Leslie Feinberg—who were rejected by their communities, and then, in a complex transference, applied Jewish models of identity to the lives of erotic outsiders.

These threads unite during an episode about the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, here called Idylwild—another bacchanal, with its own hidden divides. (The show is often at its best in huge sequences like this, from a hip L.A. music-scene pool party to a Yom Kippur breakfast.) Maura heads there with her daughters, not knowing that there's a policy excluding trans women. The sprawling, documentary-feeling portrayal of Idylwild has a woolly affection for this boob-flapping feminist jubilee: glitter and nut loaf, Indigo Girls' sing-alongs, a tepee with a Bronx-accented shaman a few feet away from a leather dyke dragging a "naughty doggy" (pro tip: Soloway herself) on a leash. It's elegiac for good reason: this summer marked the last year of MichFest, which was poisoned by its refusal to include anyone but "womyn-born womyn."

The first episode ends with haunting lyrics, "Are you coming back? I'm waiting." That song returns in the season's final moments, after a fireside debate that's richer than nearly anything I've read about the tensions between radical feminists and trans activists—a debate that, impressively, lets ragged edges stay unsanded. "Here's to the last remaining extremists," one dyke toasts. When Maura escapes, running panicked through the woods, her fury and terror echo other moments of escape: Sarah's grotesque totter down the aisle, a guilt-stricken Josh fleeing the family shul, and, most disturbing, the Pfefferman family's exodus from Berlin. It's a montage that draws brazen parallels between every kind of shunning and shame, every paradise denied, and that ends with Nazis burning books we'll never get to read. Most shows couldn't pull this off; most wouldn't try. But Soloway can't seem to play it safe. There's something to be said for bad boundaries. ♦

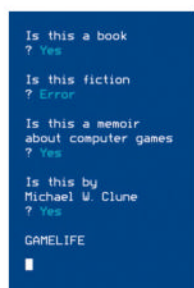
## BRIEFLY NOTED



**UNDER THE UDALA TREES**, by Chinelo Okparanta (*Houghton Mifflin Harcourt*). At the height of the Biafran war, two Nigerian girls fall in love. The romance is brief, but for Ijeoma, the narrator of this debut novel, it is the beginning of years of pain. Her mother sees the relationship as an abomination against God; Ijeoma feels choked by tradition. Okparanta is less interested in the war's trauma than in its aftermath and the meanings that characters assign to their experiences. The love story has hypnotic power, but the novel tries too hard to find in it a universal lesson in tolerance. Details of disco-era Nigeria—jerricans filled with palm wine, a suitor in bell-bottom trousers—suggest Okparanta's skill and promise.



**FINALE**, by Thomas Mallon (*Pantheon*). This populous novel of the Reagan Administration takes place late in 1986, during disastrous arms negotiations with the Soviets, the escalation of the AIDS epidemic, and the mushrooming Iran-Contra affair. Though the book revolves around Reagan, he remains a remote, hard-to-reach figure; it is through the richly imagined perspectives of an orbit of insiders—including Richard Nixon, Christopher Hitchens, and a restless, astrology-hooked Nancy Reagan—that we see these crises unfold. As the crises converge, Nancy wonders, "Could the great ocean liner of the presidency come off the sandbar and begin to sail again?" Mallon offers a useful reminder that Presidential reputations often improve with the passage of time.



**GAMELIFE**, by Michael W. Clune (*Farrar, Straus & Giroux*). Computers and computer games provide the framework for this thought-provoking memoir. Clune grew up in suburban Illinois in the nineteen-eighties, and quickly became obsessed with computer games. Emphasizing that he and his generation were children during the home-computer revolution, he discusses how the procedures of computing and patterns of computer use have influenced that generation's mind-set, and makes the bold claim that "the history of computer games is also a philosophical encyclopedia containing every important truth available to our species." Because games "turn insights into habits," and "habits bore through our defenses," Clune writes, "they teach us about death, about character, about fate, about action and identity."



**DRINKING IN AMERICA**, by Susan Cheever (*Twelve*). Beer was more potable than water in seventeenth-century Europe, and when the Mayflower's supplies were running low its captain made an impromptu landing at Cape Cod. Liquor has remained a significant influence in Americans' lives, as this compact account of the nation's often tumultuous relationship with the bottle reveals. Cheever focusses on alcohol's more damaging effects: John Adams lost two sons and two grandsons to alcoholism, Civil War doctors often became addicted to "their principal means of anesthetic," and Prohibition did not stop the excessive drinking of Hemingway, Faulkner, and Steinbeck. Not every boozy encounter ended poorly, though—the Colonies' taverns, which the Puritans considered "gifts from God," became the primary meeting places for revolutionaries.

# LIKE A PRAYER

*The poetry of Yehuda Amichai.*

BY JAMES WOOD



*Amichai's prevailing tone is direct, open, simple, hospitable, sensuous, witty.*

When we encounter a natural style, Pascal says, we are surprised and delighted, because we expected to find an author and instead found a man. Yehuda Amichai, who died in 2000, at the age of seventy-six, and is still Israel's most celebrated poet, possesses that natural style: a human being speaks, in frequencies audible to all, and the discovery is a spreading delight, a shelter and a steady accompaniment to our own lives. Yes, style is always a performance, and Pascal's adage doesn't preclude the awareness that an author might be performing at being a man, or that the surprising man might still, after everything, be a surprising author. But knowing this only sharpens the pleasure we take in those fortunate writers who, like Yehuda Amichai, are free enough to perform most naturally.

Or maybe we should be more brutal about the whole matter? Some writers are likable, and quite a few are not. Amichai is intensely likable. To read "The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), an ample new selection edited by Robert Alter, is to leaf through the calendar of a sensibility: in this bright book of life, he writes about war and love, about his mother and father, about his children and his neighbors, about loving the Jews and despairing of the Jews, about shopping for groceries in Jerusalem and the politics of Jerusalem, about sex and about God. There is anger and lament, and at times a high, stark, psalmlike rhetoric. There is much allusion (often to the Bible or to Jewish liturgy). But the prevailing tone—more than a tone, it is a way of

being in the world—is direct, open, simple, hospitable, sensuous, witty. He is often ironic, but his irony is as generous as sincerity: he is always adding, not subtracting. "I don't live like a poet," he once said, "nor do I look like one, and I have the child in me. . . . My escape route to childhood is always open." In Amichai's work, there are many such "escape routes": he has rapid access to all the senses.

How not to love a writer who spoke often about making his poetry "useful," who insisted that each of his books of verse in Hebrew should be published in the same handy format (ten by eighteen centimetres), so that they could easily be carried in a reader's pocket? And how not to love a poet who has Amichai's talent for hummable phrasing? Listen to these athletic descriptions of Jerusalem, a city that provokes him to tournaments of redefinition, in much the same way that God provoked the medieval mystics to their rising arrow showers of description: "Jerusalem, the only city in the world/where the right to vote is granted even to the dead." Jerusalem—"a port city on the shore of eternity." "The Venice of God." "An operation that was left open." These are all from one long poem, called "Jerusalem, 1967." Elsewhere, the city is imagined as a place "full of used Jews"—Jews "used by history/Secondhand Jews, with small flaws, bargains." It is a city—this is from yet another poem—where the summons to prayer is the wail of the fire engine and the ambulance. A place where, from time to time, "a new shipment of history arrives."

This talent for quick, memorable phrase-making is an art of the popular, and one that many poets, strangely enough, lack. It is an element of Amichai's ordinary vitality, the current that connects him to contemporary songwriters and antique balladeers. (In Israel, his poems have been used by musicians, and also by advertisers.) Occasionally, he abuses this facility: one can tire of the easy way in which he likens God to a tour guide (twice), or to a mechanic endlessly fixing the world; or Jacob to a "window washer to the VIPs," carrying a ladder on his back. But the talent for likening God to a tour guide is related to the talent that comes up with this: "The war broke out in the fall, at the empty border/between grapes and citrus



fruit." And: "every day of our life together/Ecclesiastes cancels a line of his book." Or this: "You had a laughter of grapes:/ many round green laughs." Or this: "And who will remember the rememberers?" This line about remembering the rememberers could be a slogan on a political or commercial poster, while the image of Jerusalem being full of "used Jews" might have come from an indie-rock song. The beautiful line about war breaking out on the border between grapes and citrus fruit may seem more considered or more original (or just more lyrical and, hence, more "poetic"), but it belongs to the same voice, the same mouth, as a laugh is related to a yawn.

Amichai's art is as appealing in its depths as in its shallows. His metaphors are more active than those of most poets. First of all, they are colossally various. He has a psalmlike register, in which laughter is like grapes, eyes are like figs, and the poet recalls his father thus: "the rivers of his hands/poured into his good deeds," and his mother like this: "I want to walk through / the deep ravines between her sobs." More often, he makes joyous and strange analogies, stretching his similes into twisted lengths of elastic wit. In "Songs of Zion the Beautiful," a long poem in which he quarrels and plays with the city in which he spent most of his life, he anatomizes its "Wailing Wall, towers, rusty halos, / all the prophecies that—like old men—couldn't hold it in."

In a tender poem about his parents, he remembers them, from the distance of his middle age, as resembling the "simple toys of my childhood," turning in circles, humming softly, raising a leg, moving slowly from side to side with the same rhythm, "the spring in their belly and the key in their back. / Then suddenly they stop moving and remain/ forever in their last position." In "My Parents' Migration," which reflects on his family's displacement from Germany (where Amichai was born), houses are "always/ Like ships," because nothing stays in place.

One of my favorite of Amichai's inventive likenesses occurs in a beautiful poem addressed to his young son. It has no title and is simply numbered "69," in a volume entitled "Time," which appeared in 1977; it was translated by Amichai and his great friend and admirer

the poet Ted Hughes. It's a bar-mitzvah poem, a blessing. Amichai begs to kiss his son once more, "while you still love it," while the boy is still a soft-skinned Jacob and before he becomes "a hairy Esau of open fields." He writes that "I'm on my way from believing in God/ and you're on your way toward it," and that this is a meeting point between father and son. In the final verse, he offers his formal blessing: evening falls, and the land is cooling, and "clouds that have never lain with a woman/pass overhead in the sky"; the desert is breathing, "and all the generations/squeeze a bar mitzvah for you." Lucky son! So many of Amichai's qualities gather here: passionate tenderness and earnest warmth, sweet possessiveness—the eros of fatherhood—and that delicious, playful metaphorical reach, those clouds that have never lain with a woman. What would those clouds look like? The metaphor can't be a visual similitude (although white, gauzy clouds could look somehow more virginal than heavy ones pregnant with rain). The metaphor—as similitude—almost "fails," but it is blazingly successful in the context of the poem's address to a young man who has not yet "lain with a woman." And, of course, the diction gently picks up the Biblical thread of the reference to Jacob and Esau, a story that begins with a father's blessing.

But plenty of writers can conjure exciting similitudes. Amichai's genius lies in how—to borrow from his own language—he makes metaphor "useful." He thinks metaphorically, and in so doing he makes stories of them, treating his likenesses as if they were not metaphorical but animated literalisms. That's why, I suspect, his metaphors have not merely poetic power but practical vitality, in the way that a horse is not only alive but usefully alive. In "Jerusalem, 1967" (translated in this volume by Stephen Mitchell), there is a verse in which Amichai begins by describing the city as "short and crouched among its hills," unlike, say, tall New York. Then he makes an animated metaphorical fiction of his original metaphor (or personification): "Two thousand years ago she crouched / in the marvelous starting-line position." All the other cities ran ahead, did "laps in the arena of time," had their victories or defeats. But "Jerusalem remained in the

starting crouch:/ all the victories are clenched inside her,/ hidden inside her. All the defeats." Amichai glides quickly between his own poetic suggestions, and this supple navigation credits his inventions with the otherness of their existence: he proceeds as if his own metaphors had the naturalness of found things, not the artifice of made things. In "Leah Goldberg Died," a tribute to a poet of an earlier generation who championed his work, the hollow of an eye socket easily becomes the hollow of a grave:

Her sad eyes are the only ones  
that could compete with my father's eyes  
in the ancient Jewish game  
of heavy eyes sliding into  
hollows beneath.  
(Now they are both there.)

And see what he does with the lowly hyphen in "Late Marriage" (about his second marriage, to Hana Sokolov; this version is by Chana Bloch). Amichai starts in his usual modest, accessible way—he is sitting in a waiting room, with bridegrooms who are much younger than the poet. The poet has "heavy steps" but "light thoughts," as opposed to when he was a young man, and carried thoughts "heavy with destiny/ on light feet that almost danced from so much future." Then, in an extended act of figuration worthy of John Donne, Amichai reflects that the pressure of his life has brought his date of birth closer to the date of his death, "as in history books/ where the pressure of history has brought/ those two numbers together next to the name of a dead king/ with only a hyphen between them." And suddenly this figure of the hyphen takes on palpable life, for it is this little temporal bridge which the poet, oldish but renewed by his late marriage, now fiercely cherishes:

I hold onto that hyphen with all my might  
like a lifeline, I live on it,  
and on my lips the vow not to be alone,  
the voice of the bridegroom and the voice  
of the bride,  
the sound of the children laughing and  
shouting  
in the streets of Jerusalem  
and in the cities of Yehuda.

Although I have quoted freely, so as to voice the melody of Amichai, I should not give the impression that he was only a lyric singer of the self and not also a religious and political debater; or that

the allusive and colloquial Hebrew of the poems can be carried over into English without leakage. I have a sense of how that melody sounds in English, but how does it sound in Hebrew? Robert Alter's scrupulous introduction, and the presence, in "The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai," of no fewer than fourteen different translators (with many new versions by Alter), reminds us that translation is arduous, necessary, and unfinished. Many of Amichai's references, puns, jokes, buried meanings—the creases of a culture, its age lines—are inevitably smoothed out of existence in translation.

The reader without Hebrew fumbles among cleaned remnants; makes do with hand-me-downs. There are beautiful poemlike forms in this book (Alter, Leon Wieseltier, Mitchell, Chana Bloch, and Chana Kronfeld earn one's particular admiration as interpreters), but I cannot judge them as translations. The line breaks sometimes appear, by the standards of English verse, almost arbitrary; so the reader shrugs and converts, happily enough, those poems into pieces of broken prose. Alter is rightly celebrated both for his translations from the Hebrew and for his scholarship. His ferociously annotated versions of the Pentateuch and of the Psalms chaperone the Hebrew-less reader through many dense cruxes. Alas, there is no such help in this volume; the fairly sparse notes at the back do little more than point to well-known landmarks, and the reader

keen to resolve lexical puzzles has to go elsewhere, to commentary by other scholars.

Context is especially important in understanding Yehuda Amichai's work, because he draws so freely on the events of his life, and because his work is closely associated with the emergence of modern Israel. He was born in 1924, in Würzburg, a Bavarian town with a large and important Jewish community. The household that he grew up in was Orthodox and Zionist, an inheritance he honored throughout his writing, even as he abandoned its formal religious beliefs and practices as a young man. He once said that his work, rich in theological struggle and plaint, merely continued a discussion he had with his father: "We loved each other very much, but we had this problem—big problem—so we go on, I go on discussing it with him. . . . When I was a child, like every child, I thought my father was really a god, and when I rebelled against him, he still was God. But then I found out, of course, that he was a human being. I think it's the same with God."

The Pfeuffers, as they were then named, left for Palestine in the mid-nineteen-thirties—children, parents, and many aunts and uncles—a happy example of a large extended family surviving intact. Amichai served in the Jewish Brigade of the British Army during the Second World War, alert to the irony that his enemy was now the German Army,

in which his father had served during the First World War. He fought in the 1948-49 Israeli War of Independence, at the Negev front, where combat was intense, and again in 1956. In such poems as "Not Like a Cypress" and "I Want to Die in My Bed," both from a collection published in 1958, Amichai declined the role of military victor or glamorous hero. He would not, he announced, stand tall like a cypress tree, but preferred to be like the grass, "in thousands of cautious green exits." He would not be Joshua, or Saul, or Samson; he just wanted to die in his bed.

His work, like his life, is closely bound up with contemporary Israeli life. His poems have been called the nation's "secular prayers." He is quoted at funerals and weddings, in political speeches and ceremonies, in rabbinical sermons and in a Jewish American prayer book. The Israeli journalist Eilat Negev tells the story of how Amichai was once watching a soldier's funeral on TV only to discover that the woman standing over the grave was reading from his poem "God Full of Mercy," his fiercely ironic version of the "El Malei Rachamim," the memorial prayer recited at funerals and on certain holidays. There is no counterpart to this popularity in American letters, though perhaps Robert Frost once approached it.

In her new book, "The Full Severity of Compassion: The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai" (Stanford), the scholar and translator Chana Kronfeld writes acutely of how Israeli (and Jewish American) appropriations of Amichai's work have often robbed it of its complicated theological allusiveness and its political radicalism. In a series of crystalline readings, she restores to his poetry its cultural dangerousness. When poems become secular prayers, reverence tends to rub away their edges. She argues, for instance, that "I Want to Die in My Bed" has too often been read as a piece of liberal quietism—the private citizen who simply prefers to retire from extended military engagements. She notes how the poem, with its mock-heroic abuse of Samson and Joshua, and lines like "Your light/ Sees fit to shine for war makers who murder all night," refuses and resists "the new, muscular image of Jewish masculinity." Indeed, Amichai's verse often sets itself against nationalistic narratives. The poet



*"What about selling drugs to the rich and keeping the money for ourselves?"*



always has, as he puts it, “the face of the conquered painted in the colors of the conqueror.” In “Songs of Zion the Beautiful,” a long celebration of Jerusalem continually curdles into defiance, lament, elegy. The poet finds himself yearning for the old, divided city. United, Jerusalem has returned to “her fat legitimate life./ But I don’t love her./ I sometimes remember the quiet one.” In “Jews in the Land of Israel,” he asks, “What are we doing / in this dark land with its/ yellow shadows that pierce the eyes?” He concludes that “spilled blood is not the root of trees / but it’s the closest thing to roots/ we have.”

Those last lines are characteristic of Amichai’s probing, ambidextrous politics, and suggest how different political camps might claim for themselves the same liberalism. On the one hand, Amichai describes nothing more than anguished historical fact: Israel as a country founded on spilled European blood and transferred pain. But another transferred pain lurks in the lines, the spilled blood of those displaced by the establishment of Israel, and to announce that one’s country is pooled in blood might be thought to hack bloodily at its legitimacy. Yet again, and against that pessimistic reading, there is merely stoic accommodation in Amichai’s words: this is what we have, and we will have to make do with it.

Some will find this politics, though compassionate and deeply liberal, too muted. Amichai tends to see Palestinians (insofar as they make any distinct appearance in his work) as, precisely, Other. In his weaker writing, there creeps into the verse a slightly reflexive, choric fatalism, a sacralizing of the land’s conflicts, in which Israel is evoked as a place haplessly soaked in thousands of years of religious strife: “In my land, called holy, / they won’t let eternity be: / they’ve divided it into little religions, / zoned it for God-zones.” But who, in these words, is “they”? “Jewish history and world history / grind me between them,” he writes, as if the soldier-poet, who helped found his nation, lacked all political agency.

The lines about the Holy Land being zoned for religion (by mysterious agents) ring slightly false, in part because Amichai’s personal religious zone—a veritable switchboard of complaint—is so lit

up with his own blasphemous electricity. No contemporary writer known to me has written as searchingly and complicatedly about God and the ghost of God, and with such rich mixtures of feeling, such brazen anguish and play. Like Jerusalem (but more so), God provokes Amichai to describe and re-describe, shatters his language into splintered approximations.

When Amichai is angry, he reaches for savage inversions: as we once hid from God in the Garden of Eden, now God hides from us (“And That Is Your Glory”). The age of sacrificing animals to God has passed, and instead it is we who sacrifice ourselves to God (“Those Were Days of Grace”). God may be “full of mercy” (liturgical words from the prayer for the dead), but he hogs all the available mercy for himself, and “Were God not full of mercy / there would be mercy in the world, and not just in Him” (“God Full of Mercy”). If, Amichai says, I believed in God, I wouldn’t tell him about the wars I have fought in, “as one doesn’t tell a child about the grown-ups’ horrors” (“What I Learned in the Wars”). God is like a rich, spoiled “only God,” akin to an only child (a fabulously ironic identity for the God who invented monotheism).

These fruitful negations are the fated language of a man for whom God, like time, is always present and always gone. And these gestures and quarrels are more than the merely familiar struggle of the atheist who constantly invokes a God he does not believe in. Amichai does not believe in God, and does not want him back—but what has belief got to do with it, if (in the Feuerbachian sense) we invented him anyway? How to uninvent him? How to purge him from our grammar? Gods change, but prayers are here to stay, as the title of one of Amichai’s poems slyly has it.

Besides, the God of the Jews—the “only God” of an only people—is a national possession, not just a theological one. If God disappears, do the Jews disappear? Perhaps the threat also exists the other way round? In several poems, Amichai gives expression to a fear that the Jews and their God might go down together, united in oblivion. Perhaps he will “forget not his own,” but perhaps it’s too late: “the Jewish people is gone.” What does a father do, Amichai asks, in “Gods

Change, Prayers Are Here to Stay,” when “his children are orphans and he / is still alive?” And what will a father do when his children are all dead and he becomes “a bereaved father for all eternity?”

In the same magnificent poem, Amichai despairingly proposes a new, post-Auschwitz theology, in which God’s dead people, those who died in the Shoah, now resemble their dead God, the deity ideally described by Maimonides as having “no likeness of a body and . . . no body.” God is at once the designer (or, at best, a voyeur) of the Holocaust and its most famous victim, destined to disappear in smoke, like his murdered people. The philosopher Emil Fackenheim once proposed, after Auschwitz, what he called a “614th commandment,” in which the Jewish people are enjoined to survive as Jews, lest the people of Israel perish; commanded to remember the Holocaust, lest that memory perish; and “forbidden, thirdly, to deny or despair of God . . . lest Judaism perish.” Amichai is sympathetically alert to Fackenheim’s tragic anxiety. But, cheerfully and despondently, comically and tragically, reverently and heretically, he breaks—because he must be free to break—Fackenheim’s fearful commandment.

It is the cheerfulness that lingers here behind the lines, like a happy schoolboy, as world history continues its stolid death march. Amichai has many modes, but a faithful and fortifying humanism is his commonest and his most delightful. He ends a poem in this volume with characteristic pleasure: employing the presence of God only to displace him, he puns humanely on “His” and “his.” In Rome, the poet says, he once saw a woman waiting at a corner. He adds that he doesn’t know how long the woman stood there, or whether the person she was waiting for turned up. But, he continues, “after her death” God will “gently pry open her head, as He always does,” to seek “the name of the one she truly loved.” And? “And it won’t be His name, it won’t be His.” Amichai is a man who, as he once playfully put it, rebelled only a little, because he did, after all, observe the laws and the Commandments—the laws, he quickly adds, of gravity and equilibrium, and the horror of the vacuum. Which is to say, he belongs not only to Israel and to the Hebrew language but to all of us. ♦

## DIVAS UNDER FIRE

*Two new American operas: "Bel Canto" and "Great Scott."*

BY ALEX ROSS



“Not my style—it’s in English,” an operagoer said at the Lyric Opera of Chicago the other night. The company had just performed the first act of Jimmy López’s *“Bel Canto,”* in its world premiere, and the dissatisfied customer was headed for the exit. It was a curious thing to say, since the libretto of *“Bel Canto”*—an adaptation, by Nilo Cruz, of Ann Patchett’s 2001 novel about a hostage standoff—is not only in English but also in Spanish, French, German, Italian, Russian, Japanese, and Quechua. The imprecision of the complaint made the underlying prejudice all the clearer. For a good portion of the domestic opera audience, the idea of Amer-

ican opera is a contradiction in terms.

This bias has persisted for the better part of two centuries. The musicologist Douglas Shadle, in his absorbing new book, *“Orchestrating the Nation,”* draws attention to a controversy that arose in 1845 over William Henry Fry’s *“Leonora,”* the first American opera to win wide notice. In an essay that Fry appended to the score, he defended his work from the notion that the English language should be “excluded, by its nature, from the highest form of opera.” At an early stage, Shadle explains, native composers found themselves in an impossible double bind: “If works were too ‘American,’ they were not serious

enough; if they were too ‘European,’ they were not original enough.” Not surprisingly, the pressure to find an imaginary midpoint between Europe and America led to large quantities of music that was neither here nor there.

All the same, the operas keep coming—there have been thousands since Fry’s time. I attended two premières this fall: *“Bel Canto,”* earlier this month; and Jake Heggie’s *“Great Scott,”* at the Dallas Opera, in October. Both had American singers as central characters, creating a palpable self-consciousness about the exercise of making opera in America. In *“Great Scott,”* which has a libretto by Terrence McNally, a celebrated mezzo-soprano is visited by the ghost of a bel-canto composer, whose work she is reviving. The composer is grateful for the attention but urges the singer to pay more attention to new work, asking, “When did you start living in the past and stop living now?” Sadly, for American opera and its audience the answer is: From the start.

Before *“Bel Canto”* opened, the media made much of its relevance to current events. The story, based on the Lima hostage crisis of 1996–97, unfolds in a South American country that goes unnamed in the novel but that Cruz identifies as Peru. At the residence of the Vice-President, a birthday party is being given for a Japanese electronics magnate. His favorite diva, Roxane Coss, has been hired to perform. Guerrillas storm the house, expecting to find the President, but he is not in attendance. The sight of armed figures rushing onstage chillingly recalled the recent massacre at the Bataclan theatre, in Paris. The frisson of danger dissipated, however, when it became evident that the opera, like the novel, inhabits a world of make-believe, in which the magical power of music melts the hearts of terrorists and fosters bonds of affection, even of love. John Adams’s *“The Death of Klinghoffer,”* by contrast, scares us much more deeply by raising—and then rejecting—the fantasy of common ground between terrorists and their victims.

Despite the violence of the opening scene of *“Bel Canto,”* and the mayhem that breaks out at the end, the work is strangely lacking in dramatic tension. Patchett’s novel aspires to the atmosphere

*In “Bel Canto,” opera creates bonds between terrorists and their hostages.*



of Latin-American magical realism, but its central conceit, of a celestial voice that soothes savage breasts, is a feeble one, and her vague musical descriptions fail to flesh it out. Moreover, the conceit is difficult to translate into opera: we can't perceive the transforming power of one voice when everyone is singing. Cruz's libretto does, however, improve on the discursive chatter of the book, substituting blunter, starker language. "Our war is infinite, insatiable," the terrorists sing, in Spanish. "We're not temporary warriors. We're not warriors out of whim."

What animates the story is López's score, which begins in full fury—dark, ragged fanfares in the brass, redolent of the main-title theme of a nineteen-fifties Hollywood thriller—and hardly lets up. López is a thirty-seven-year-old Peruvian-American who studied in Lima, Helsinki, and Berkeley, acquiring a virtuoso mastery of the modern orchestra. His music is thick with reminiscences of sounds of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ranging from Strauss and Stravinsky to Revueltas and Villa-Lobos, with echoes of recent John Adams thrown in. But López avoids the familiar *mélange* of influences that so many American opera composers offer—some Puccini here, some Britten there. He isn't afraid of hard edges, grinding dissonances, spells of near-anarchy. He's also deft at musical character sketches: a growling Mussorgsky-like aria for a Russian character, a glistening Impressionist air for a Frenchman. When the terrorists force Coss to sing, López supplies her with a spooky distortion of "Lascia ch'io pianga," from Handel's "Rinaldo."

"Bel Canto" is López's first opera, and his inexperience shows in the way voices are sometimes drowned out by instrumental pandemonium. He harps too much on simplistic sequences; the ears tire of melodramatic augmented triads in the orchestra. The transitions from bloodthirsty choruses to wistful arias are often awkward, with too many slow fades and sighing semitone descents. Still, López's vigor holds the attention.

Kevin Newbury staged the action with assurance, making the most of a straightforward grand-foyer set, by David Korins. Andrew Davis, in the pit, led with precision and force. There were sharp characterizations in supporting roles—Jacques Imbrailo, sensitive and a touch

ambiguous as a Red Cross representative; Andrew Stenson, subtly expressive as the Japanese industrialist's translator—but Danielle de Niese found little substance in the central role of the diva. She also sounded strained against López's orchestra. With a stronger female lead, this promising first opera might snap into focus. In a healthier musical culture, López would now be on his fourth or fifth opera, working out the kinks as he goes along.

Heggie, the composer of "Great Scott," has plenty of experience: he has composed five full-length operas, with a sixth arriving next year, and these days he receives more performances than any American but Philip Glass. His two big hits are "Dead Man Walking," an adaptation of Helen Prejean's book about Death Row, and "Moby-Dick," an attempt at Melville. Heggie's strength is the naturalness of his vocal writing; singers who otherwise balk at new opera delight in his idiomatic feeling for the voice. His weakness is a tendency toward stock gestures. "Moby-Dick," which I saw at L.A. Opera in November, whips up surface excitement but misses the sublime terror of its source.

"Great Scott" departs from the standard American-opera template in one significant way: this is not an adaptation of a well-known novel, play, or film but an original story. A noted American diva named Arden Scott has returned to the Midwestern city where she grew up, and where the local opera house, a struggling outfit called American Opera, is putting on a bel-canto rarity, "Rosa Dolorosa, Figlia di Pompei." Needless to say, complications ensue: the company struggles to stage the eruption of Vesuvius; an ambitious younger singer moves in on Scott's territory; and the city's N.F.L. team, the Grizzlies, aims at winning the Super Bowl the same night.

"Great Scott" was designed as a vehicle for the lustrous mezzo Joyce DiDonato, whose career resembles that of the fictional Scott in more than a few respects. Scott's younger rival—a flighty, narcissistic singer named Tatyana Bakst—might remind viewers of one or two headline-grabbing Russian sopranos of the hour. There's a gym-bunny baritone who removes his shirt at every opportunity—a sendup of the ongoing fad for "barihunks." McNally's libretto

overflows with such insider jokes and jabs: we see the backstage maneuverings among singers, conductors, chorus members, stagehands, donors, and neglected spouses. Unfortunately, the libretto is so steeped in knowing wit that it has trouble taking flight as drama, and, with a running time of three hours, the opera loses sparkle well before the end. A neat backstage comedy is buried in here somewhere, but major cuts are in order.

Heggie assimilates the mass of verbiage thrown his way, though often he seems to be scurrying to keep up: too much of the opera consists of breathless recitative. He invents plausible pseudo-Donizetti for the opera-within-the-opera, playing to DiDonato's dual gifts for coloratura agility and lyric repose. He also writes a zany tour de force for the Bakst character: in one scene, she inserts herself into the football pre-game show and delivers "The Star-Spangled Banner" as an ornate bel-canto showpiece. Heggie stumbles, though, when it comes to evoking a modern opera—an adaptation of the Medea story—that Scott has shied away from singing. We hear a few bars of it, but it's not sufficiently differentiated from Heggie's own style to register as a musical character. This is the rare contemporary piece that could use more pastiche, not less: a kaleidoscope of disparate styles would have better served McNally's conception.

"Great Scott" had a shiny first night in the Winspear Opera House, the Dallas Opera's handsome, resonant home. Jack O'Brien directed with comic flair; Patrick Summers gave the score much-needed forward momentum. DiDonato was in full, bright voice, turning on a dime from slapstick to pathos; Ailyn Pérez feasted on the role of Bakst. The most memorable turn, though, was by the brilliant young countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo, as a put-upon, underappreciated stage manager. He sang with tensile strength and acted with a stage veteran's skill. As it happens, Costanzo also appeared in "Bel Canto," as a teen-age terrorist who, in the course of the long siege, discovers a gift for singing. The moment he broke into a rendition of "Una furtiva lagrima," he made real the story's improbable premise that opera could melt a terrorist's heart. This immensely gifted singer deserves a big new opera of his own. ♦

THE THEATRE

# DREAMGIRLS

*John Doyle's fresh and vital revival of "The Color Purple."*

BY HILTON ALS



Although the civil-rights movement did a lot to change how black life was dramatized on the American stage in the fifties and sixties, white composers and lyricists often still rely on familiar tropes when it comes to representing black women in musicals. This is not surprising. American musicals are, for the most part, about boys, or boyish pursuits and aspirations—the fantasy of freedom and resolve—and those dreams have little to do with the reality of most black women's lives. Still, some politically committed theatre artists have fought to bring different kinds of stories to the musical form, and to liberate black female stars from the bondage of playing “black,” rather than embodying a complete character.

Diahann Carroll gave it her all as Barbara Woodruff, a model whose race was not a plot point, in Richard Rodgers's 1962 piece, “No Strings.” But that show was unusual, and remains so. In 1967, Betty Comden, Adolph Green, and Jules Styne poured their liberal hipness and guilt into “Hallelujah, Baby!,” which tells the story of Georgina (played, in the original production, by Leslie Uggams, who won a Tony for her performance). Georgina is a kind of archetype: a young indomitable black woman who survives the Great Depression, the Second World War, and showbiz racism without aging or relinquishing her dream of becoming a star. When Uggams sang “Being Good Isn't Good Enough,” at the end of the first act, she

knew what she was talking about—she was, after all, a black actress trying to make it on Broadway in the sixties:

Being good won't be good enough.  
When I fly, I must fly extra high  
And I'll need special wings, so far to go  
From so far below.

Close your eyes, and little has changed, dramaturgically speaking, in the forty-eight years between the time that Georgina dreamed her dream and that Celie, a poor, obscure, and blighted black woman, living in the early-twentieth-century South, embraces her own view of life's dreams and realities in “The Color Purple” (at the Bernard B. Jacobs). Near the end of the show, the formerly spiritually and mentally shackled Celie steps into her glory, intoning:

Dear God, Dear Stars, Dear Trees, Dear Sky . . .  
God is inside me and everything else  
That was or ever will be.  
I came into this world with God  
And when I finally looked inside, I found it,  
Just as close as my breath is to me.

Celie's paean to being harks back to another song of survival—the classic chant “i found god in myself/& i loved her/i loved her fiercely,” from Ntozake Shange's 1976 choreopoem, “for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf.” But is survival, wrapped up in an “indomitable spirit” shawl, the only story that black female characters get to tell on Broadway? It takes a director with John Doyle's visionary capabilities to dispense with the “Mamba's Daughters” aspect of Celie's story and, instead, exercise empathy, critical distance, and an openness to lives and cultures other than his own. (Doyle's direction is much more intimate and nuanced than that of Gary Griffin, who helmed the show's 2005 Broadway premiere.) By not falling prey to the story's periodic sentimentality, Doyle, who is Scottish, has created a theatrical world that's fresh, vital, and unexpected. The twenty-eight-year-old English actress Cynthia Erivo is central to his work. Her Celie is not a noble survivor but a stubborn, intelligent force, who is well aware of her own wit and wariness.

The 1982 novel “The Color Purple,” by Alice Walker, was inspired, in part, by a story that Walker's sister told her, about a love triangle involving their grandfather. (Walker, who grew up in rural Georgia

*Cynthia Erivo elevates the musical to a level that's unusual on and off Broadway.*



in the forties and fifties, was the eighth child of a sharecropper and a domestic.) The book begins as a series of letters that Celie writes to God, because, apart from her sister, Nettie, she has no one else she can talk to in their rustic, isolated world. (Nettie is wonderfully played onstage by Joaquina Kalukango.) Repeatedly raped by her stepfather, who takes her babies away as soon as they're born, Celie spends her days sidestepping pain and trying to find order in a harsh, disorderly world. More or less sold off as an adolescent to Mister (Isaiah Johnson, who never hams up the villainy), a farmer who needs a wife to take care of his children, Celie describes her nuptials this way:

Dear God, I spend my wedding day running from the oldest boy. He twelve. His mama died in his arms and he don't want to hear nothing bout no new one. He pick up a rock and laid my head open. The blood run all down tween my breasts. His daddy say Don't *do* that! But that's all he say.

Celie has no defenders, and thus no love until Shug Avery (Jennifer Hudson) appears on the scene. The problem is that Shug is Mister's longtime mistress, an itinerant blues singer who believes in the pleasure that Celie has been denied. The intimacy between the two women is hard-won: Shug is defensive about her relationship with Mister, and Celie resents having to take care of yet another person in his life. (He brings the ailing Shug to stay at their house.) But, through the caring, Celie and Shug bond. Marsha Norman wrote the lean and sensitive stage adaptation, and it's a measure of her insight when it comes to a play's shape that she draws out what's *essential* to the story: female friendship—and how it can be sabotaged by poor self-perception.

Eventually, Mister's goofy eldest son, Harpo (Kyle Scatliffe), finds love in the meaty arms of the outspoken Sofia (Danielle Brooks), who will not be suppressed. When Harpo admits that he can't control his wife, Celie, her eyes hardened by experience and lack, suggests that he beat her. It's a shocking moment of betrayal, but why wouldn't Celie betray another woman? Time and again, she has been betrayed and beaten because she's a woman. As Doyle directs it and Erivo plays it, Celie is mystified by the women around her who manage not to be subjugated survivors. She disapproves of them, and wants to be like them, and doesn't understand

them. All of this adds up to eros. Erivo portrays Celie's complications with an astonishing emotional readiness and purity; she has no truck with the standard Broadway bombast. She's a little girl with a big voice, who, like the young Judy Garland, doesn't really know how to pretend: what she has to offer is her authenticity. Erivo knows why a song works, and how to make it better. (The music and the lyrics are by Brenda Russell, Allee Willis, and Stephen Bray.) She emotes, but never with attention-grabbing affect. Whether she's singing or simply waiting and watching, Erivo elevates the musical to a level that is unusual both on and off Broadway. She tells the truth, and we want to go wherever it takes her. (Hudson, unfortunately, is a lacklustre Shug. Performing alongside Erivo or the fantastic Brooks, she's a cipher, a voice without a soul.)

Walker's novel falters about halfway through. Celie reads some letters from Nettie—which Mister hid from her—and learns that her children, who she thought were dead, were adopted. This discovery helps Celie find her own voice ("I may be black. I may be ugly. But I'm here") and no doubt gives her the courage to move to Tennessee with Shug, where she designs trousers for women. Walker's writing is, at times, a little heavy-handed—pants as a symbol of female independence—and Steven Spielberg mistook that heaviness for seriousness when he adapted the book for his 1985 film.

Doyle doesn't weigh us down with all that; he relies on the actors' performances to tell us what to feel and when. Demonstrating the skill and imagination he showed in his revivals of "Sweeney Todd" and "Company," in 2005 and 2006, respectively, Doyle also rejects the Broadway vogue for dramatic stage pictures. Around the set, which he designed, there are wooden walls with chairs attached to them. The chairs are a motif: they're the pews in Celie's church, and the seating at the juke joint that Harpo opens near Mister's house. Celie, a churchgoer who ultimately builds a temple of the self, sets foot in Harpo's place only once—to watch Shug perform. Love is always a great spectacle, and it's especially satisfying when directors like Doyle and stars like Erivo understand that, and something more: black or white, male or female, theatre-makers and audiences are united in their interest in what makes people people. ♦

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## WILDER WEST

*"The Hateful Eight" and "The Revenant."*

BY ANTHONY LANE



Quentin Tarantino directs Kurt Russell, Jennifer Jason Leigh, and Samuel L. Jackson.

Combine two films released on Christmas Day, Quentin Tarantino's "The Hateful Eight" and Alejandro González Iñárritu's "The Revenant," and what have you got? Five hours and thirty-eight minutes of malice and mistrust, in which the characters—mostly men—are trapped in extreme weather conditions and settle their differences with extreme violence. So much for peace and good will. If I said that my thoughts, during those long and bloody hours, didn't stray now and then to Bing Crosby, I'd be lying.

"The Hateful Eight" takes place in postbellum Wyoming. The film is of epic duration and, like "Lawrence of Arabia," includes an intermission, yet its settings could not be more cramped. Much of the first half is spent in a stagecoach, and the rest—barring brief trips to a stable and an outhouse, plus a few flashbacks—is spent in Minnie's Haberdashery, a lonely hangout, which also serves coffee and stew. As for Wyoming, we see it in fits and starts: icy plains and peaks, whose purpose is less to dazzle us than to wall in the dramatic personae. At selected theatres, the

movie will be screened in 70 mm., which sounds grandiose, but, as with Paul Thomas Anderson's "The Master," in the same format, what absorbs the director is the ever-changing landscape of the human face. Nothing was as daunting in Anderson's film as his closeups of Amy Adams, and Tarantino grants an equal honor to Jennifer Jason Leigh. She plays an outlaw, Daisy Domergue, and one slow look that she gives, raising her face, with a black eye and a crinkled grin, to fill the screen, may be the most convincing portrait of wickedness—and of its demonic appeal—in all of Tarantino. With that smile alone, Leigh possesses the film.

To say that Daisy is going to meet her doom is not quite right, because her doom is travelling beside her, in the person of John Ruth (Kurt Russell), a bounty hunter. He is bringing her to be hanged in the town of Red Rock, where he will collect a handsome reward. En route, they pick up a couple of wayfarers—Major Marquis Warren (Samuel L. Jackson), who is in the same trade as Ruth, and Mannix (Walton Goggins), who says, "I'll be double dog

damned!" and who will soon be assuming the post of Red Rock's mayor.

The coach arrives at Minnie's, where the rest of the lineup is assembled: a Mexican named Bob (Demián Bichir), an old Confederate general (Bruce Dern), a near-wordless hulk (Michael Madsen), and a fussy little Brit, who introduces himself as Oswaldo Mobray (Tim Roth). They are said to be random strangers, but we have our doubts. From the start of the film, there's a creepy—not to say ridiculous—sense of everybody, wherever they hail from, being cuffed and tied by circumstance. "Considerin' there's a blizzard goin' on, there's a whole lot of fellows wanderin' around," Ruth says, on sighting Mannix. The line gets a laugh, but it's a ruse: Tarantino is palming off the convolutions of his plot as a knowing gag. Not content with mustering his suspects, as if they were the snowbound passengers in "Murder on the Orient Express," he needs to be sure that we appreciate his cunning—even addressing us in voice-over, after the intermission, and showing us a clue we may have missed. What a wag.

The movie, billed in the opening credits as "The 8th Film by Quentin Tarantino," is a beastly brew: a blend of Agatha Christie and Sergio Leone, spiked with postmodernist poison. We get an Ennio Morricone score—sadly, no match for "Once Upon a Time in the West," where his musical glories washed in sadness against Leone's array of sombre deeds. We get a lot of talk about Civil War treachery and payback; as in "Inglourious Basterds" and "Django Unchained," history is something to be toyed with, not explored—a chance for boyish fantasies of revenge, as if enormous crimes could be undone, after the event, by lone and wanton acts of humiliation. We get plenty of ripe performances, with Jackson and Russell enjoying a tight battle of whiskers and pipe smoke. Above all, we get confirmation of the director's preëminent perversity: patient and elaborate in his racking up of tension, he knows only one way to resolve it, and that is through carnage, displayed in unmerciful detail. To be fair, the more blood is spilled, the more some people lap it up; the audience at my screening howled with glee as Daisy's face was showered with the contents of someone else's head. *Chacun à*



*son goût.* By the end of “The Hateful Eight,” its status as a tale of mystery and its deference to classic Westerns have all but disappeared, worn down by the grind of its sadistic vision. That is the Tarantino deal: by blowing out folks’ brains, he wants to blow our minds.

There you are, somewhere near the Missouri River, on a freezing day. You’ve got no place to stay, so what do you do? You check into a horse. If you’re Hugh Glass (Leonardo DiCaprio), the hero of “The Revenant,” that is your preferred method, and it’s hard to quarrel with, though it can’t be much fun for the horse. You slit open the belly, tug out the guts, strip naked, crawl inside, read a little light fiction for a while, and nod off.

The basics of life—clothing and food, as well as accommodation—are much to the fore in “The Revenant,” which is set in the eighteen-twenties. Glass’s principal outfit is a shaggy animal pelt that he wears as a poncho. For nourishment, he sucks marrow from the skeleton of something horned; catches a writhing fish and tears the flesh off with his teeth (all in a single shot); and chows down on a nameless hunk of bison, also uncooked. You *can* experience that type of cuisine nowadays, but only if you order the foraging menu at a restaurant in Copenhagen, whereas Glass is dining, for free, on the borders of civilization.

Not that Iñárritu’s movie has much faith in the civilized. Glass belongs to a motley band of hunters and fur trappers, ravaging the land and its fauna for profit. They number forty or so, in

a rough hierarchy, with Captain Henry (Domhnall Gleeson) just about keeping charge. Also present are a cussed crook named Fitzgerald (Tom Hardy); Bridger (Will Poulter), who’s barely more than a kid; and another youngster, Hawk (Forrest Goodluck), who is Glass’s son by a Native American woman. The whole plot is impelled by Glass’s paternal loyalty to Hawk, but that is thinly sketched, and I never quite believed in them as father and child.

The first twenty minutes are the best. As we contemplate the hides stretched out to dry, or baled up for shipping downriver, the hunters are suddenly ambushed on every flank by Arikara, who resent the rape of their country. When one of them, on horseback, rides into the frame, we stay with him, galloping onward until he is felled, whereupon we switch our attention—our sensory allegiance, as it were—to the man who brought him low. Then *he* is downed, too, and the camera is trained on his aggressor; and so forth, in a roundelay of horror that feels as if it could go on forever. Thanks to that fluency, the scene becomes a savage sequel to Iñárritu’s “Birdman,” which also ducked and darted from one figure to the next.

The survivors of the fray take to the river, in a graceless boat that resembles a log cabin, and then continue their trek, to the fur traders’ camp, on foot. Glass, out on a morning foray, falls afoul of a bear, who is protecting her cubs: an astounding sequence, not just because her claw swipes are so murderously fierce but because the ferocity rises and fades—she stops mauling, sniffs him, licks his face, ambles off, and then, just when you

think the onslaught is over, comes back and swipes anew. Once it *is* over, at last, Glass is in shreds, strung between life and death. Henry decides to carry on without him, leaving him in the care of Bridger, Fitzgerald, and Hawk. That arrangement falters, and soon it is Glass alone who must, like a tattered Odysseus, make his way home.

The hitch with tales of endurance, onscreen, is their unfortunate habit of becoming endurance tests for the viewer, and, after a while, “The Revenant” turns into a slog. Make no mistake, it’s a very beautiful slog. Emmanuel Lubezki’s cinematography summons a wealth of wonders, and there is one image, of a Pawnee warrior arcing his bow beside a fire, in a whirling squall of snow, that I will not forget. But some of the beauty has a willful air, and seldom do we feel that the moments of transcendence have been happened upon, as we do with a film like Werner Herzog’s “Aguirre, the Wrath of God.” What Iñárritu has created is less an adventure than a solemn pilgrimage, suppressing the giddy flights of “Birdman,” and, as for DiCaprio, his forte—a comic impishness, last released in “The Wolf of Wall Street”—is sternly curbed. Awed reports of what he went through, on the set of “The Revenant,” cannot disguise the fact that his character is a moral monotone, who suffers great afflictions but no change. Although the wild world is thrown at him, how much really stirs in the heart of Glass? ♦

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Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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*Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Tom Cheney, must be received by Sunday, January 3rd. The finalists in the December 14th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the January 18th issue. The winner receives a signed print of the cartoon. Any resident of the United States, Canada (except Quebec), Australia, the United Kingdom, or the Republic of Ireland age eighteen or over can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit [contest.newyorker.com](http://contest.newyorker.com).*

### THE WINNING CAPTION



*"Looks like you boys could use some water."*  
Chris Sunami, Columbus, Ohio



### THE FINALISTS

*"If I knew Larry, it's hollow inside."*  
Bradley Erickson, Iowa City, Iowa

*"Costco."*  
Elif Wisecup, Birmingham, Mich.

*"I can tell you exactly what he was compensating for."*  
J. D. Landis, Exeter, N.H.

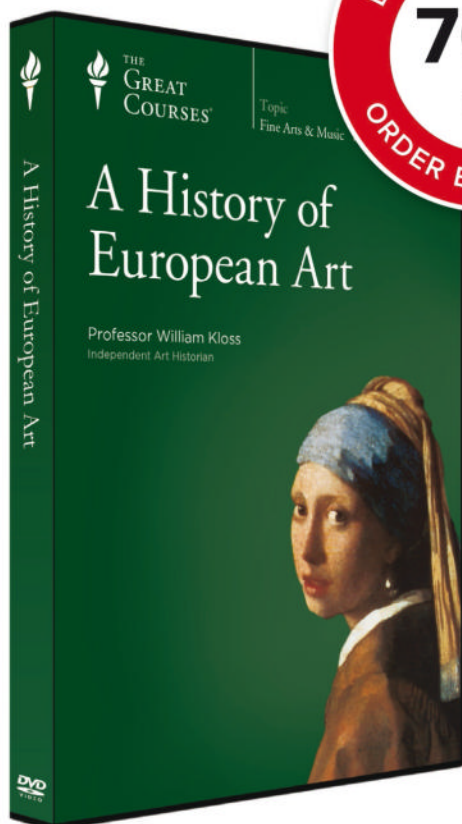
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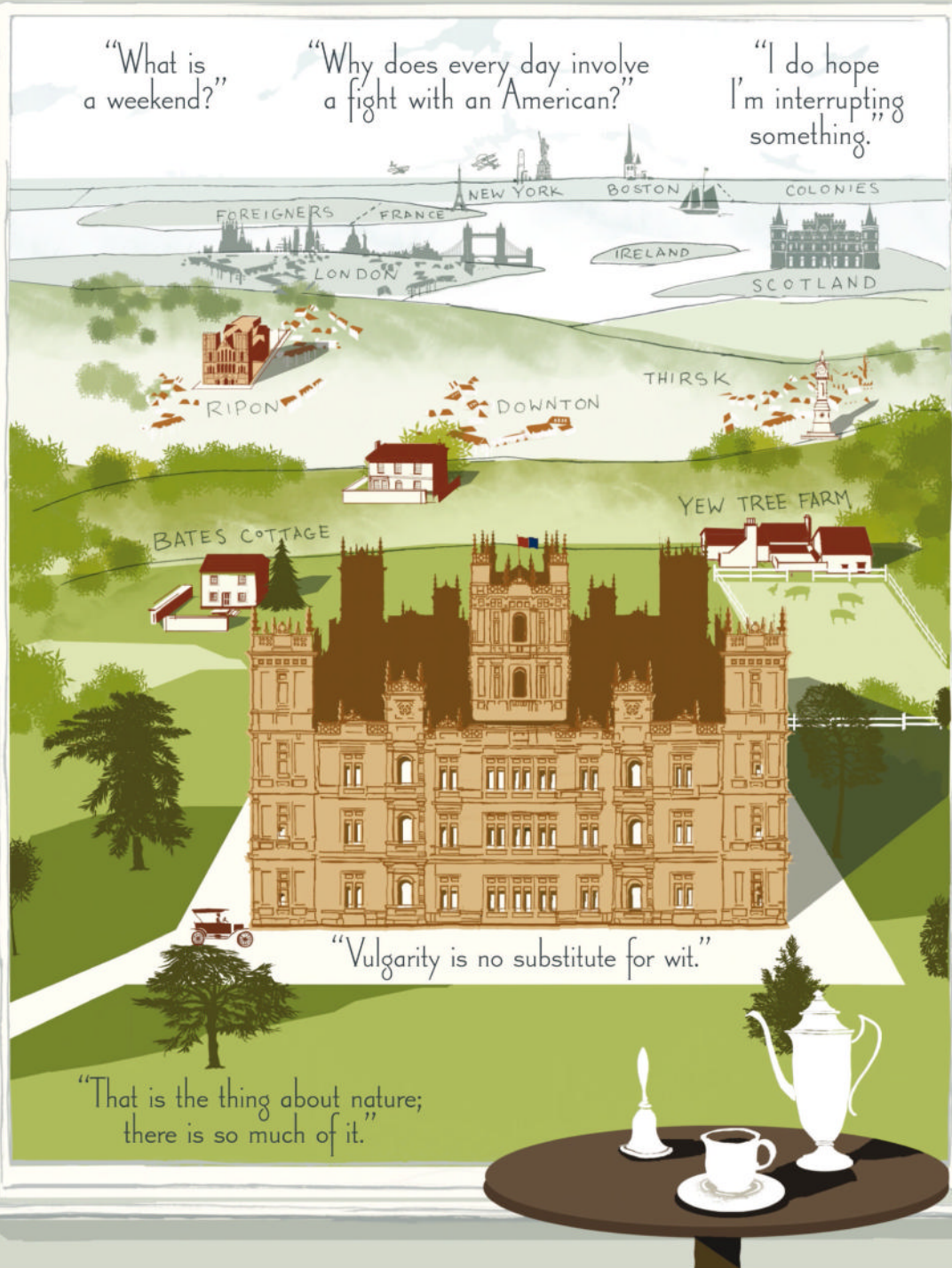


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